SIMPLE PETER CRADD

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E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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SIMPLE PETER CRADD

A Novel

BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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TO

VIOLET

SOMETIMES MY HELPER

AND ALWAYS

MY DEAR FRIEND

E. P. O.

BOOK I

SIMPLE PETER CRADD — CHAPTER I

PETER CRADD had awoke that morning in a curiously detached frame of mind. His occasional matutinal irritability was not in evidence. He waited patiently until Henry and George, his two sons, had vacated the bathroom, regardless of the fact that by virtue of a common understanding they had no right to enter its sacred precincts until he himself gave the signal. He listened, without even a single sarcastic comment, to his wife's long series of complaints against Sarah, their domestic appendage, as the former fussed round the room. It all suddenly seemed to him so insignificant—his wait on the cold oilcloth with his underclothes and socks upon his arm, the screeching of the gramophone below which always made his head ache before breakfast—Lena, his jazz-mad seventeen-year-old daughter was the culprit—his wife's monotonous grumbling, which, having disposed of Sarah, passed on to severe strictures upon the tradespeople, regrets that they could not afford this or that, naggings about Henry's cigarettes and George's unpunctuality. He watched her covertly as he tied his tie. She had grown much stouter during the last few years, and, without a doubt, her voice had become louder and more peevish. Her hair, which she had once been persuaded by a more frivolous neighbour to have touched up, was now an unpleasant shade of ashen grey, her underclothes seemed cumbrous to him, and to require excessive manipulation—untidy, with strings, gar-

ments without lure or mystery. He found himself dreaming for a moment guiltily of the chiffon-strewn windows of a West End shop which he passed most mornings—the waxen figures with their modest yet brazen display. There was one attired in the filmiest of pink *crêpe de Chine*, leaning a little invitingly forwards, whose eyes seemed sometimes to meet his—a creature of wax—and yet !

" Will you tell me, Peter, what you are sitting there mooning for, with breakfast all but ready, and your bus to catch ? " a hard voice suddenly demanded. " I don't believe you've heard a word I've been saying."

Peter Cradd was already on his feet, pulling at the ends of his tie.

" Yes, my dear, I heard—of course I heard," he assented, trying to reconstruct the sense of that vague tinkle of babbling words. " It was about Padstowe, the butcher. Certainly, if you wish to make a change, why, go to Jones. Give him a trial by all means."

His better half threw him a suspicious glance.

" Wish you'd had common sense enough to say so six months ago," she grumbled. " You wouldn't listen to it then, just because this Padstowe was a Mason, or an Oddfellow, or something."

" My dear," Peter Cradd explained, " I like to deal, where I can, with my friends, but one must have the best value. Certainly, with our limited means, one must insist upon the best value ! You are quite right there."

Once more Harriet Cradd looked at her husband long and suspiciously.

" Can't make out what's come to you this morning, Peter," she observed. " You seem—well, gone away from yourself somehow—seem to be looking—where on earth are you looking, Peter ? "

"I really don't know, my dear," he assured her hastily. "Fancy on your part—fancy! Ah, the gong! Now for breakfast. Do I smell kippers?"

"You may," she answered, "but it's haddock you're going to have. And just speak to George about getting in so late, will you? Night after night it's the same thing. That Seddon girl, I'll bet!"

Mr. Peter Cradd made no reply, but he knew very well that no reproof to anyone would pass his lips that morning. He took his place at the end of the ill-laid breakfast table, and although the far-away expression was there in his grey-blue eyes, he saw everything with an unaccustomed and peculiar distinctness. He saw the stains upon the tablecloth, the sticky marmalade pot, in which someone had stuck a knife and left it, the butter, an unwholesome-looking mess, already trickling towards the edge of the dish, the mangled remnant of a thin, bony haddock, the succulent parts of which had already been seized upon by the early comers. An indifferently baked tin loaf of unappetising appearance and badly hacked about stood upon a wooden platter, ornamented with ears of corn. A piece of gammon, mercilessly dealt with by every member of the family, quivered upon a chipped dish. Opposite to him his wife dispensed a thin brown liquid from a metal coffee-pot, and bemoaned the fact that the milk was turning. His eyes lingered upon her. She was a large woman, of buxom type, in whom prosperity might have developed a certain good-nature, but whom long years of comparative poverty had soured into a fault-finding callousness. The charm of femininity had passed—there was nothing left even to lighten the dim fires of memory—a human being, perhaps—no more—unwieldy of form, graceless, sexless. By her side was George,

pallid and pimply, with sleek, over-brushed hair, shirt of violent design, reading a newspaper propped up in front of him—not the cricket news, but a serial, with strong sex appeal. Next to him was Lena, undressed, after the style of the moment, good-looking in her way, but with a complexion which suggested that her cleanliness was more a matter of powder than of soap and water. She had finished her breakfast, and was studying herself, lipstick in hand, with the aid of a small mirror. Opposite was Henry, a sullen-faced youth of his mother's type. He was still eating, noisily, greedily, yet with a certain supercilious distaste of his food, expressed more by gesture than facially. This was his family—the family of Peter Cradd, leather-trades salesman, yet a man who in his youth had trifled with fancies.

"You will have to give me a little money this morning, Peter," his wife said firmly. "The milkman is sure to ask for it, and the baker was quite rude yesterday."

Mr. Cradd came to himself with a little start. He had been watching a faint beam of early spring sunshine lying upon the worn carpet.

"The milkman and baker, my dear," he repeated —"certainly. Not a large amount, I hope."

"Twenty-six shillings the two," was the glum reply; "but if you can spare a little more——"

"I say, dad," George intervened, "couldn't I join the tennis club? I believe I could get in just now. It's only a guinea."

"I'm afraid that guinea will have to come out of your own pocket," his father regretted. "Just at present business is bad. As soon as it improves, I'll see what I can do."

Henry pushed on one side a catalogue of motor-bicycles which he had been studying.

"I'm the only chap in our office who hasn't got a motor-bike," he grumbled. "I could get the best one on the road if I had five pounds down."

"I could join the golf club," Mr. Cradd sighed, "if I had the money to pay my entrance fee. What about you, Lena? What are your particular wants for the moment?"

The girl put her lipstick away deliberately.

"Well, if I had any," she said, "it doesn't seem to me that I should stand much chance. Not here, at any rate."

Peter Cradd's face momentarily hardened. Then came a merciful diversion. It was the sound which brings expectation or fear into the hearts of many millions of people every morning—the click of a letter-box, the dropping in of some letters, the falling upon the hard floor of one or two of the envelopes. George was the nearest to the door, and he hurried out. He returned with a little packet in his hand.

"Not much good to anyone, I should think," he declared, distributing them. "Another catalogue of motor-bicycles for you, Henry—can't think how you have the cheek to write and ask for them. Bills for you, Lena—two of them. Bills for you, mother, or circulars. Nothing for yours truly. Bills or circulars for you, dad, and one letter. What a post!"

Lena dealt promptly with her correspondence, and pushed away the results with a little grimace. Her mother followed suit. Mr. Cradd ascertained the fact that he was indebted to Padstowe, the butcher, for three pounds seventeen and sixpence, and gathered from a hand-written and underlined intimation at the foot of the bill that the money would be acceptable. He was also reminded of the fact that even a coal merchant to whom one owed

such a trifle as six pounds and sixpence sometimes requires payment, whilst the third envelope contained a circular recommending the purchase of a very superior stove. There was also the announcement of a garage to be opened in the next street, and one of those letters, the type of which Mr. Cradd knew too well from the outside. From the expensive stationery, the typewritten address, the embossed initials on the back of the envelope, he knew at once that it was from a lawyer, and the probable nature of its contents had been a nightmare for many days. He looked around the room a little helplessly. This was life! This was what he had come to at forty-six years of age! He was unable to pay his bills. Desperately though he worked, he was behind, and getting farther behind all the time. Bills littered the table. The money for the milkman and the baker would leave him without a shilling for his lunch, and into his pocket he had dropped—a leaden weight, it felt to him—that grimmer threat which had been hanging over him for days.

Then his eyes roved back to the beam of sunlight which had found a certain spot in the carpet, and seemed determined to stay there. Somewhere out in the country, where men had little gardens and met their bills, the crocuses must be coming out, and in the fields beyond shy violets under the hedges. A sudden mental sickness seized strange hold of him. He looked at the soiled and untidy table. He looked at his unlovely family. His eyes left them all, and followed that slanting ray of sunlight out of the window. He began to laugh. It was a gentle, mirthless effort, but, after all, it was a laugh. He leaned back in his chair, and through his lips still came that uncanny sound. Into it seemed to be gathered the repressed bitter-

ness and cynicism of his unlived life. It was the cry of a soul in purgatory up to the blue skies of heaven. They all stared at him.

"What in the name of goodness has got you, Peter?" his wife demanded.

Peter Cradd made no reply. He was wiping his eyes.

"What's wrong with your father this morning, I can't imagine," Mrs. Cradd continued, looking around at her family for sympathy. "Mooning about upstairs as though he'd lost his senses, and me talking to him all the time, and not a word from his lips but 'Yes, my dear,' and 'No, my dear.' And now sitting there laughing like a natural fool! What have you got to laugh at, I should like to know, you or any of us?"

The master of the house was himself again. He rose slowly to his feet.

"I am sorry," he apologised. "I really don't know why I laughed. It didn't seem a very reasonable thing to do, I admit. I am afraid I was rather inattentive, too, this morning. You see, it is so much the same thing all the time, isn't it? The bills must be dealt with, of course, but they are troublesome."

"Well, at any rate," his wife enjoined sternly, "don't forget to give me that money for the milkman and the baker."

Peter Cradd produced a worn, leather purse, and handed out two treasury notes, which left him with a threepenny-piece and a few coppers. Then he left the room. A few minutes later, attired in a thin grey overcoat, bowler hat, inked in several places, carrying an umbrella, although the day looked fine—because he did not possess a walking-stick—he looked in at the door for a moment.

"Well, good-bye, all of you," he said.

"So long, dad!" Henry rejoined, without looking up from his catalogue.

"I wish you could have managed that guinea," George grumbled. "It isn't everyone in this street has a chance of joining the tennis club. They get more select every season."

Mr. Cradd made no reply. At that moment he would have found speech, perhaps, a little difficult. He closed the door, walked out, and made his way to the corner of the street where the omnibuses for London Bridge passed. Presently one arrived. He clambered up, having denied himself the luxury of a newspaper, and sat, looking restlessly about him. Mr. Joshua Barnes passed in his new motor-car, smoking his pipe contentedly, and reading the morning paper. A successful man, Barnes! In the same line of business as himself, but a man who had had capital, had launched out on his own account, and found it easy, without the incubus of a family, to get on in the world. Sam Bloxom, in a forty horse-power Renault, swung round the corner, and departed westwards—a prosperous-looking bookmaker, attired in conventional tweeds, Homburg hat set at a rakish angle, and smoking a huge cigar. An old admirer of his wife's, Sam—as she had more than once reminded him in the course of her periodical naggings. Bills were no nightmare to these men. Both had made their fortunes, earned their luxuries, and, younger men than Peter Cradd, were drinking happily of their chosen cup of life.

There was Richard Lasson, too, a wholesale grocer, strolling out of his handsome house, and calling for his customary taxicab. An excellent business, the grocery business, Mr. Cradd reflected. A pity it hadn't been selected for him instead of leather. Thirty-two years he had been working, he ruminated, as the bus swayed from side to side,

and drew up at a crowded corner. Five situations he had held. Two he had left through the failure of his employers, one because he was not pushing enough, one because he was superseded by a younger man, and this last one—well, his hold upon it had become a daily struggle. And even if he held it, unless the boys could earn more money quickly, how were they to go on? . . .

He pushed these thoughts away, and tried to plan out the day's campaign. He made up his mind to go a long way afield, to start in one of the outlying districts of Tottenham. There was some new stock he might take samples of. Perhaps they would not be too heavy to carry if he could find a bus. Then his heart sank again like lead. Changing his position slightly, he became aware of the letter in his pocket. Slowly he drew it out. Well, at some moment or other during the day he would have to read it. Why not now? Even though he was on the top of a bus, he was almost alone. There was a little sunshine warming him, a pleasant breeze, except when it came gustily round the corners, little flecks of blue sky overhead, no one he knew to watch him. Bravely he tore open the envelope, noticed to his surprise that the name of the solicitors engraven in the left-hand corner of the heavy notepaper was strange to him, and, drawing a little breath, fixed his attention grimly upon the typewritten lines.

And this is what he read:

"DEAR SIR,—

"*We beg to announce ourselves as the London agents of Messrs. Treavor, Heaton & Co., Solicitors of Christchurch, New Zealand. We understand from the firm in question that you are the sole residuary legatee of the late Mr. William John Cradd,*

merchant farmer and sheep dealer of New Zealand. We should be glad if you would give us a call at your earliest convenience. It transpires that the estate is very much larger than our friends in Christchurch had anticipated, and they desire immediate instructions and authority to deal with the stock in hand.

" Our Mr. Spearmain will make a point of remaining in his office the whole of Thursday morning, and we beg that you will take this opportunity of seeing him.

" Faithfully yours,

" SPEARMAIN, ARMITAGE & SPEARMAIN."

Mr. Cradd leaned back in his seat, and laughed softly. He had a pleasant habit of laughing in the face of any great emergency, when his brain failed to respond entirely to the stress of circumstances. He had once nearly been turned out from witnessing a melodrama on this account, and he had earned grave disapproval from a friend's wife when at a funeral this strange travesty of mirth had come instead of tears. Such a letter, to him—Peter Cradd—to whom no one had ever given or lent a sixpenny bit in their lives! What an absurdity! What a trick of his brain! He looked steadily ahead of him. Then he was conscious of a hot wet ball of paper in his hand. He opened out the letter, and read it again. But it was there, in black and white, word for word. He gripped at the side of the omnibus. The conductor, who knew him well, leaned over in passing.

" Not feeling quite yourself this morning, sir? " he asked.

Mr. Cradd held out his hand.

" Would you mind shaking hands with me," he begged. " I want to feel sure that I am here."

The omnibus conductor obliged, with a grin.

"If it were evening now instead of morning, sir," he said, "I might think you'd had the odd one. However, I hope it's a bit of luck, and not bad news."

He passed on. Mr. Cradd descended as usual at London Bridge. He was in the act of hailing the bus which crossed the Bridge and set him down in Bermondsey when he felt the sudden pressure of a great determination. He crossed the road to a telephone booth, and rang up the firm.

"Guv'nor come yet, William?" he asked the warehouseman.

"Not yet, Mr. Cradd. You'll have to hop along though if you want to get in ahead of him. Dickson's have returned all those samples."

Mr. Cradd sighed. A deal with Dickson Brothers had been the great hope for the day. He pushed the thought away, however.

"William," he said, "will you tell the guv'nor if he gets there before me that I have been obliged to make a call in the City. I'll come along presently. And you might look out several lots of samples from all that new American stock. I shall go down to Tomlinson's later on."

"Right-o!" was the bluff reply. "And look here, Mr. Cradd—you don't mind from me, I know—just take my tip—don't make it too late. The guv'nor's raggy—very raggy. Dropped a hint last night about new blood wanted in the selling line."

"Thank you, William," Mr. Cradd replied. "I won't forget."

He hung up the telephone receiver, and, taking another bus, made his way to the dignified purlieus of Lincoln's Inn. At the hour of half-past nine, he was received there with some surprise, but the mention of his name produced attentions which

embarrassed him. He was installed in the room of an absent partner, provided with a supply of newspapers, and begged to make himself comfortable until Mr. Spearmain arrived. The door was closed softly upon him by a deferential clerk. Mr. Cradd looked out of the window. There was one particular tree which took his fancy—a lime tree, showing signs of blossoming. He watched the leaves bent backwards and forwards by the wind. Then he looked round the room—a stately, dignified office—glanced at the papers which had been placed by his side, and which contained new matter for him, as he had decided to save his penny that morning! He took up *The Times* and found it all blurred. He wiped his eyes, discovered a hole in his handkerchief, and tied a knot around it for purposes of concealment, had another try at a newspaper, and was discovered there studying blankly unseen pages about a quarter of an hour later by a very pompous and dignified gentleman in morning clothes, with a red rose in his buttonhole, a carefully arranged cravat, grey moustache and side whiskers, and an encouraging smile.

"Mr. Cradd, I am told," he said.

Peter Cradd rose to his feet.

"That is my name, sir," he acknowledged.

Mr. Spearmain approached, and shook hands. To shake hands with Mr. Spearmain was always a ceremony.

"There is no mistake, I trust," he said. "You are Mr. Peter Cradd, born in Stevenage in the county of Hertford in 18—?"

"That is quite correct," was the nervous response. "I have my birth certificate at home."

"You had a cousin, William John Cradd?"

"That's so. Three years younger than I," Mr. Cradd replied. "He went out to Australia twenty-

five years ago, and moved to New Zealand. I often wish I'd done the same thing."

Mr. Spearmain smiled.

"You have probably arrived at the same result, Mr. Cradd," he said, "as if you had exiled yourself from your country all these years. Will you be so kind as to step this way."

Peter Cradd stepped humbly in the wake of the great man, pausing once to mop his forehead, holding the knot of handkerchief carefully in his hand. Yet when he had ensconced himself in the famous clients' easy-chair and looked around at the dignified room with its mahogany furniture, his brain seemed suddenly clearer. He began to realise what might have happened. And yet, with his luck, it wasn't possible! There was a catch somewhere—there must be!

"In the first place," Mr. Spearmain began, "I have to offer you my heartiest congratulations. Your cousin has died, I believe, without issue, or any other known relative. In any case none are mentioned in his will. A copy of it will be given you to take away. It is what I call an admirably clear and concise document. The point is that, so far as he is aware, Mr. William Cradd possessed no other relative but you. He has therefore left you the whole of his estates. He begs you, however, as an act of grace, if you should discover any traces of two second cousins, whose names he gives, to assist them in life in any way that may seem good to you. He himself had lost all trace of them."

"We heard once or twice," Peter Cradd murmured in a low tone, "that William had made money, but I never understood that he was a rich man."

Mr. Spearmain smiled.

"Then you must prepare yourself, sir, for a

shock," he announced. "Your cousin's estate, so far as it has been discovered at present, works out at something like two hundred thousand pounds, after the duty has been paid."

Tin boxes climbing over one another, mahogany tables upside down, dancing, a silly desk jumping into the air, and catching its papers again, a floor that seemed to be sinking, sinking, sinking. Then Peter Cradd sat suddenly up in his chair. Mr. Spearmain was standing benevolently over him with a glass of water in his hand.

"Drink this," he enjoined. "You'll soon feel better."

Peter Cradd drank it and felt very much better.

"Two hundred thousand pounds!" he gasped.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER II

The business interview which followed between Mr. Spearmain and his new client was of an eminently satisfactory character. A messenger boy was despatched to Bermondsey, and duly returned with Mr. Cradd's birth certificate, which happened to be at the moment in his desk for purposes not unconnected with a projected loan on his life policy. Meanwhile, the latter executed a dead of attorney to Messrs. Spearmain, Armitage & Spearmain in London, and Messrs. Treavor, Heaton & Co. of Christchurch, New Zealand, and listened with reverence to a long list of very excellent securities of which he was now the possessor. It was almost eleven o'clock when at last a pause arrived. Mr. Spearmain, adjusting his eye-glass, cast a surreptitious glance at his client, and leaned once more back in his chair.

"You will understand, Mr. Cradd," he explained,

" that some short time must necessarily elapse before the whole of the estate will be in your hands, but, in the meantime, if you will permit it, any reasonable advance you may like to accept is yours for the asking. Your birth certificate, which seems to be in order, and which accords entirely with our information, has established the matter of your identity."

" You mean," Peter Cradd ventured—" forgive me if I am a little confused—you mean, in plain words, that I can have some money if I want it."

" Certainly," Mr. Spearmain assured him grandiloquently. " Name your sum, and I will ring for a clerk to draw an open cheque at once."

" It will certainly make the thing seem more real," his client admitted, with a quaint little smile.

Mr. Spearmain was in benevolent accord.

" I quite agree with you," he said. " Take five hundred pounds, say, away with you. Remember, we shall want to see you often during the next week or ten days. We should like you to be here again to-morrow. If you would care for more money then, our banking account is practically at your service. There is nothing to prevent your handling a matter of twenty or thirty thousand pounds before the end of the week."

Five hundred pounds! Exactly a hundred a year more than his yearly salary. Five hundred pounds! Every debt in the world gone. Such things didn't really happen—and yet!

" I should like five hundred pounds," Mr. Cradd said.

The lawyer rang the bell, and leaned back in his chair. To the slim young man in spectacles who promptly appeared, he gave a few words of direction.

" Make out a cheque, Higgins, for five hundred

pounds, and debit to the account of Mr. Peter Cradd. Mr. Reginald will sign it. Step across and bring us the notes—in not too large denominations, I should think."

The young man hurried off. Mr. Spearmain settled himself down to make pleasant conversation with his strange client.

"Almost like a chapter from a story, what, Mr. Cradd," he said—"this unexpected coming into money? Is it long since you saw your cousin?"

"Scarcely since we were boys. I'd almost forgotten his existence. Once there was a mission from New Zealand over here for some purpose or other, and I read that he was one of the members, so I gathered that he had progressed in the world. I myself have not been fortunate."

"What is your present occupation?" Mr. Spearmain enquired genially.

"I am salesman to a firm of leather merchants," Peter Cradd replied. "I have never been a great success in life. I suppose I lack the push my cousin had. My present salary," he added, "is four hundred a year."

"Four hundred a year! Dear me, dear me!" the lawyer sympathised, reflecting that it was just what he had agreed to pay his new head gardener. "You are married?"

"I have a wife and three children."

"This will be wonderful news for them."

"Marvellous!"

The lawyer was called away for a moment to speak to a distinguished client who was tired of waiting, and it was probably in that moment that Peter Cradd's fell scheme was conceived. Only the glimmering of it came to him then—just the seed of a thought—but it was a seed strongly planted. It grew and blossomed during the day.

At its first inception he felt a certain sense of shame, but before many hours had passed he was obsessed with it. It was in his mind when Mr. Spearmain returned, and handed over the largest sum Peter Cradd had ever handled in his life.

"Five hundred pounds, sir," the lawyer announced. "Don't be afraid of asking for more. As a matter of fact, I think that there is sixty thousand pounds lying idle in the bank at Christchurch. We must deal with it at once—sheep-shearing season, or something, my people say. Do us the favour of calling again to-morrow afternoon at two-thirty if possible. The next mail will be in then, and we shall have some more papers for you to sign."

"I will be here."

Under the dignified portals of this august office, Peter Cradd, in his shabby bowler hat, and with his umbrella under his arm, stood looking out for several moments at a blurred procession of vehicles. Suddenly he had an idea. He raised his umbrella. A taxicab drew up at the kerb.

"Proctor's Row, Bermondsey, number eleven," he directed.

The man slammed the door, and, without any particular enthusiasm for his shabby client, started off. Peter Cradd leaned back in the corner. It was not a very nice taxicab. Someone had been smoking and left cigarette ends about and the cushions needed brushing, but to its occupant it was a vehicle of luxury. It was, so far as he could remember, the second time in his life he had hired and ridden in a taxicab on his own account. . . .

He arrived at his destination at something like twenty minutes past eleven. His friend William—a brawny, muscular man, who had a sneaking fondness for the firm's unfortunate little traveller—

met him at the door, and handed him a huge brown paper parcel with an envelope tucked under the string.

" The guv'nor's gone out to have a drink with Mr. Jennings," he confided. " He's been gone half an hour. If you skip it quick, I'll say you came just after he went. What's that you've got there—a taxi ? Gawd ! "

" Put the parcel in the taxi, William," Peter Cradd ordered.

William shook his head in melancholy fashion.

" You know very well the guv'nor won't stand for it," he remonstrated. " They won't pay you out of petty cash."

" In that case," was the unconcerned reply, " I will pay for the vehicle myself."

William scratched his chin.

" You haven't been having one, have you, sir ? " he asked doubtfully.

Peter Cradd smiled as he stepped inside the cab.

" I shall probably have two before the day is out, William," he confided. " You needn't be alarmed. I have had a stroke of good fortune."

He drove off, and William, after a dazed stroll around the warehouse, decided upon a hurried visit across the road to commemorate his friend's great luck. In the meanwhile, the taxicab proceeded to Tottenham, and Peter Cradd exploited his firm's goods. With that bulge in his pocket, a new confidence seemed to creep into his manner. After all, there was no sack for him if he didn't get an order, or if there was it didn't matter. By a curious dispensation of fate, he concluded the best morning's business he had achieved for years, and faced a wrathful employer on his return about one o'clock with equanimity.

" What the devil's happened to you, Cradd ? "

the latter demanded angrily. " I waited for three-quarters of an hour to give you instructions, and William tells me you hired a taxicab to go out to Tottenham. You know very well the firm can't afford that sort of extravagance."

" I'm willing to pay for it myself, sir," Peter Cradd replied, " to make up for having been late this morning. If you'll glance through these, sir," he added, handing over a few slips, " I think you'll see that I have been very fortunate. I was just in time to catch Rosenfeld's before they placed their order elsewhere. I was very lucky, too, with Mr. Jacobs."

His employer's wrath disappeared as he scanned the order slips. He leaned over, and patted his traveller upon the shoulder.

" That's a darned good morning's work, Cradd," he declared, " and just when we needed it—needed it badly, I can tell you. And so did you, if you only knew it. Stick the cab down to the petty cash. We could stand one every day on business like that."

He hurried away to his office. Peter Cradd, who had four hundred and ninety-nine pounds and sixteen shillings in his pocket—he had changed one of the notes—walked off to the nearest A.B.C. and indulged in the rare luxury of an eighteen-penny chop.

Afterwards they all declared that they had noticed something queer about the governor that night. Henry remembered that he had washed his hands, and then gone upstairs and washed them again in a fit of absent-mindedness. George referred to a clean collar, which at the close of the evening seemed an absurd piece of extravagance. Lena remembered that, notwithstanding the inquisitive

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glances of curious passers-by, he refused to allow the blind to be lowered, and sat at his place at the head of the table, looking out sometimes with a curious wistfulness at the deepening twilight. There was a joint to be carved at the long-to-be-remembered evening meal, the scrag end of a neck of mutton for which even Mrs. Cradd felt almost compelled to apologise.

"Ought to have been put in the stew-pot, I suppose," she observed, "but it's the best that Padstowe would send us, until his bill's paid. Anyhow, there'll be a bite for everyone, and there's a good piece of Dutch cheese left."

There was a bite for everyone, except perhaps Peter Cradd, who suddenly awoke to the realisation that he had dispensed the whole joint without serving himself. No one, however, appeared anxious to notice the fact. He helped himself to some potatoes and watery cabbage, and looked around. Not one of his family had made the slightest attempt at any change in his or her toilet. Henry's fingers were ink-stained, and by the side of his plate was one of those eternal catalogues. His hair was stiff and unparted. His tie had moved sideways. His finger-nails were not above reproach. The colour of George's shirt in the twilight seemed even more offensive than in the morning, the wrong shade of blue, the impossibly assertive tie, the clothes unbrushed. Mrs. Cradd was exactly as she had been at breakfast, only a little more dishevelled. There was a smut upon her face; she had assisted, it seemed, in the kitchen. Her hands were red and moist. A button had come off the front of her gown. Her day seemed to have been spent between disputes and slumber. Lena alone appeared to rise a little above her surroundings, from the fact of her complete

contempt of them. She ate quickly, and she furtively watched the window. Without waiting for the promised cheese, she brought out her tarnished mirror, and remnant of lipstick, and commenced her mild effort at self-adornment. After which, she rose.

"Going out for a bit," she announced. "See you all later."

The same phrase, the same habitude, but this time interrupted by a curious and unexpected phenomenon.

"Sit down again, Lena," her father ordered.

She stared at him with a cigarette hanging from the corner of her lips.

"What say, dad?" she demanded.

Peter Cradd was sitting quite upright. As they all remembered afterwards, there was a curious, compelling look about him.

"Be so good as to resume your place, Lena," he enjoined. "I have something to say to you all."

"I've got a date," she muttered, hesitatingly.

Her father pointed to her chair, and she relapsed into it without a word. Mrs. Cradd's mouth was a little open, and she was too astonished for speech. Henry had looked up from his catalogue of motor-bicycles. George was leaning back with his hands in his pockets. What was the governor going to spring upon them, anyway?

"I wish," Peter Cradd began, "to enter into a brief discussion with you all, the members of my family—you, Harriet, and you, Lena, you, George, and you, Henry. I have never seemed to count for much to any one of you in your lives. I've just been the poor sucker, struggling against fate to provide you all with food and a roof. Now I want to ask you something. My first question to you all will be academic—if any of you know what

that means—and to judge by the literature you've all indulged in since you left school, I should doubt it—but there it is. It is a question in the air, if you understand me. I ask it out of curiosity. It may have no relation to present facts. I shall start with you, Harriet. What would you do if you suddenly became a rich woman ? "

" What's the use of talking such trash ? " Mrs. Cradd protested, as soon as she had recovered from the first shock of her husband's composed speech. " How are we going to get rich, I should like to know. It's borrow, borrow, borrow, debt, debt, debt, until we don't know where to turn to get food because of the bills we owe, and you sit there, and ask me what should I do if I were a rich woman ! "

" Nevertheless," her husband begged, " humour me. I may be an unenterprising, unsuccessful fool. I may have failed in my first duty, which is to provide you all with food and shelter and clothing, but there are times when you should remember that I have done my best, even if I have failed. Now, please answer my question, Harriet."

Mrs. Cradd consented without further protest to this incursion into the land of dreams. She half closed her eyes.

" I should take the empty house at the corner of the street," she said, " next to the Vicarage. I should have three maids with white streamers and black dresses. I should ask everyone I don't know here, and who's been rude to us, to tea, and I should give 'em tea and champagne and ices, and tell them what I thought of them. That's what I should like to do ! And I'd go round to the tradespeople who've bullied and worried us, and I'd place the money down on the counters, and I'd say —' Now you can all of you go to—hell ! We're going to deal somewhere else.' And afterwards——"

"Well, I think that might do," her husband interrupted. "What about you, Lena?"

The girl yawned as she put away her mirror.

"I should buy a two-seater car," she announced, "join the tennis club, and golf club, and make friends with some of the nice people round here who go up to the West End. Then I should try to get made a member of one of the really nice dancing clubs there, and dance every night—dance, dance, dance."

"And you, George?"

The young man smiled condescendingly.

"Well," he said, "I don't know that Lena's so far out. I should like to belong to Ciro's, and dine there as often as I wanted to. I should like to get a job in a stockbroker's office, get there at eleven o'clock, and leave at four. I should like a coupé car, and a little flat of my own somewhere near Jermyn Street."

"And you, Henry?"

Henry tapped fiercely with his knuckles upon the catalogue he'd been reading.

"I," he answered, "would like to have a number one, ten-horse-power Douglas motor-bicycle. I should like to chuck all work, and I should like to ride until I was tired from town to town, stay at the best hotels, drink as much champagne as I wanted, wander round the place afterwards, and do what I jolly well pleased without having to get up at eight o'clock next morning to be at my office."

Peter Cradd had listened to every member of his household with the same careful and rapt attention. When they had finished, he knew that this terrible thought, which had been lurking in his mind for so long, was built upon a solid foundation. He hated his family. For some subtle reason, there

was not a shadow of sympathy between him and any one of them. He hated them all. He had known beforehand just about what they would say. He had known beforehand only to despise their narrow vision. And from his place in front of that empty table, where not one small piece of that scrag of mutton had been left for him, over his parboiled potatoes, over the untidy and uninviting head of the woman who had been his peevish companion for all these years, he looked out into the velvety twilight, and up into the faint flare towards the starlit horizon, and in that moment he framed and enunciated his great lie.

"These questions," he said, "have not been altogether purposeless. I beg of you not to take me too seriously, but there appears to me to be a reasonable chance that at some time during the near future you may be in a position to indulge in your various whims."

One might have expected astonishment. Instead there remained incredulity mixed with a faint scorn. It was a curious fact, and one which Peter Cradd in those days had often been forced to realise, that not one of his family believed in him. They had, in fact, the most intense contempt for his career, his achievements, and his intellect. The books he sometimes read were strange to them. The walks he took were in regions they would, at any time, have avoided. There were remarks which sometimes fell from him which they never understood. There were seeds of curious thoughts, of sarcasm or sympathy in his conversation which left them blankly unaware of his meaning. Their one feeling with regard to him was a lukewarm pity, mingled with contemptuous self-commiseration that such a parent should have been visited upon them. So, in these few moments, not one of them in their

wildest imaginings believed that by any possible turn of the wheel of fate could fortune have come to so undeserving a recipient. Lena once more rose from her place. Henry turned back to his catalogue. George counted over the coins in his pocket, wondering how best to waste them. Mrs. Cradd frowned at her husband.

"What's the good of all this, Peter?" she demanded. "What are you getting them all started up for?"

"My dear," was the polite response, "I have had news to-day. Something has happened."

Again they all turned towards him—this time faintly hopeful. What could happen to the family of Cradd that was not for the better? The master of the house proceeded in his magnificent mendacity.

"I've a cousin in New Zealand," he confided, "of whom I do not suppose that one of you has ever heard. He is a wealthy man. So far as I know, I am almost his nearest relative. He has expressed a desire to see me at once. He has sent the money for me to start upon the voyage—the full fare. He has also sent sufficient money to provide for the household during my absence."

The bombshell had fallen indeed. They stared at him breathlessly. And then, Peter Cradd, in those few seconds, was vouchsafed the gift of clear-sightedness. He looked from one to the other, and he read the thoughts of each. There was Henry, his narrow eyes sticking out, his right hand still grasping that catalogue. Enough to support the household! Would there be enough to help him attain the aching desire of his days? There was George by his side, also engaged in greedy speculations. Would there be enough to enable him to go to that tailor in the Strand which he could seldom

pass without a little stab at his heart? There was Lena, her really rather nice eyes wide open now, wondering, wondering how much this meant, whether it might not be a proper and decent step into another world? And opposite him was Harriet, grimly suspicious, doubtful, unable to bring herself to believe that such a man as Peter Cradd could own a cousin with real money, or, if he did, one who would want to see him.

"Hitherto," Peter Cradd proceeded, "I have handed to you, Harriet, for the housekeeping, the sum of four pound ten a week, which, to my great regret, you have found insufficient, so that we have been frequently, I fear, annoyed with troublesome tradespeople. You, George, and you, Henry, have lived here, paying nothing for your board, and I have occasionally advanced you small sums towards your expenses. Lena, I think, has paid ten shillings a week, but that has been more than crossed out by the premium I paid to Mrs. Maloney for her education in the art of manicuring. The other expenses in connection with the house, I have borne myself. My salary has been, as you know, four hundred a year. Of that I believe that I have retained as much as eighteen pounds during nearly twelve months. I remind you of these financial facts so that you may not feel uneasy. My departure will leave you better off. My cousin has sent the sum of one thousand pounds to keep my household going during the period of my absence."

No one believed it. George and Henry exchanged quick glances. Neither of them had the slightest doubt as to what had happened. They had always looked upon the governor as half balmy; now he'd gone off the deep-end altogether. That purposeless laugh itself was adequate proof. Mrs. Cradd had the same thought. She began to

dab at her eyes with a soiled and unpleasant fragment of linen.

"I am in a position," Mr. Cradd continued, producing his only slightly reduced roll of notes, "to start you off for a week or two, as I am compelled to leave to-morrow before noon. Here, you will see, are four hundred pounds. There is a fifty-pound note, Henry, for your bicycle. I think that during my absence you need not worry about any attempt to contribute to the household expenses. With regard to your own projects, George, at present I am not able to help you indulge these, but here is fifty pounds, with which I should suggest that you find some linen of less offensive design, and some clothes which would enable you, if the time should come, to assume the dignity of a flat in Jermyn Street. And Lena, you have spoken to me of a few bills. Here is your fifty pounds. Let there be no more question of bills. And remember, if at any time money is a necessity, appeal to your mother. She will have plenty in hand. Appeal to your mother, and your mother only. None of you," he went on, "need contribute to the expenses of the household. It is my desire—my cousin's desire, I should say—that you have an easy and a pleasant time during my absence. Here are two hundred and fifty pounds, Harriet, which I pay over to you. You will discharge all outstanding bills. You will, I hope, engage a more experienced servant, and save yourself all unnecessary labour. The remainder of the thousand pounds promised by my cousin is in the hands of his solicitors, Messrs. Spearmain, Armitage & Spearmain, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. It will be paid to you at the rate of fifteen pounds a week, and if my stay in New Zealand is protracted it will probably be increased. You see, therefore, that

you will have no anxiety in the matter of finances."

"Crikey!" George exclaimed, clutching his notes.

"I'm all in!" Henry muttered, poring over his catalogue.

"Dad, I'm going to shriek!" Lena exclaimed.

"Who is this cousin of yours?" Harriet demanded suspiciously.

"His name is the same as my own, and he is a wealthy sheep farmer," was the calm reply. "I am going out to see him, and I have reason to believe that for the rest of our days we shall be able to work our way on to whatever success we may deserve without being cramped by poverty. Remember that, all of you. Money is not a thing to be thrown away. Its greatest use on this earth is to enable one to live with dignity. That's all there is to be said. I should be glad if you would help me pack, Harriet. I am leaving to-night to meet the young man who is to take me down to Tilbury, where I join the steamer, and sail to-morrow morning."

Harriet was speechless. The whole party seemed for a moment to have become stupefied. Then Peter Cradd rose to his feet, and the spell was broken.

"Hurrah!" cried Henry.

"Dad!" Lena exclaimed, throwing her arms round his neck. "Who would have imagined you had a cousin like that! My bills paid! Shan't I be curt with my clients now I haven't got to cadge for tips."

"I shall give a tea next week," Mrs. Cradd announced.

"I'm going to write off for this bike," Henry declared, making his way to the writing-table.

"I shall take Lottie to the cinema," George shouted, springing up. "See you later."

They all dispersed in pursuit of their own chosen pleasures—Lena blandly indifferent to her mother's appeals for help in packing her father's clothes. Peter Cradd resumed his seat. He looked around at the four empty places, and experienced the sweet relief of solitude. It was at that moment he began to wonder what life might really be like.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER III

A HAY-FIELD, grass nearly ripe, its mingled perfumes floating on the sunlit air, and the sea glimmering barely twenty yards away. The thing didn't seem possible, and yet there it was. Flowers, too, amongst the grasses—too many poppies for anything but beauty, a few blue cornflowers, some purple orchises growing close to the ground. Peter Cradd raised himself lazily from his hidden place amongst the quaker grasses, and for a long time sat in a crouching position, his chin supported upon his hands. Before him was a long estuary where day by day the silver sea came dancing in or sobbing its way out to the muddy banks. Just now the tide was on the turn, and every moment it flowed more deeply, and spread wider. Every moment it seemed to bring more pungently the real salt savour of the distant ocean. Above his head a lark was singing. He watched it drift farther away over the swampy inland until its notes became like the faintest tinkling of some fairy music. There were other birds twittering around, the humming of many insects in the grasses, and all the time the gurgle of the rapidly filling silver waterway. There was a book in his pocket, but who could read on such a morning? Every sense in his body seemed to be receptively open to warmth

and perfume, sweet visions and sweet sounds. Peter Cradd forgot to think—he lived.

Down the winding estuary came a tiny skiff, tacking from side to side—a little before its time, perhaps, because as it reached the point where Peter Cradd was seated, it grounded on the mud. The seaman took out a pole. The mud was sticky, and one of his sleeves hung emptily down. He looked at Peter Cradd, seated there, his trousers turned up to his knees, showing his bare legs.

"Will 'e give us a shove, mister?" he asked invitingly.

Peter Cradd, who had already been paddling in the cool velvety water, sprang to his feet at once. The mud oozed up between his toes as he stepped into the stream. He had almost reached the skiff, before he became conscious of its passenger. He paused suddenly. A girl, with closely cropped, fair hair, a white sweater, very open at the neck, and a negligible white skirt, was lying flat on a rug in the bows. She was, like him, bare legged; she, like him, had apparently been dreaming. She turned over on one side and her eyes smiled into his.

"Coming to give us a shove?" she asked. "My fault. I would start out. Large here said we might get stuck. It will be all right lower down."

"I will help with pleasure," Peter Cradd replied.

A puff of wind brought the boat over to a perilous angle. The boatman stood up, and hauled down the sail. Cradd advanced and gripped the side of the skiff. He looked curiously at its occupant—a pleasant, even a pretty face, a little tired, perhaps, but with a line of sunburn already creeping over her fair skin. There was something in her expression which awoke an instantly responsive spark in his.

"You look very contented and happy," he remarked.

She smiled at him.

"It's so wonderful," she murmured, "to be alone."

Cradd put his shoulder to the task, in went the pole, and the skiff floated off. The girl waved her hand lazily, and Cradd, wading to the shore, threw himself once more on to the cool grass, with his glistening legs in the sunshine. To be alone! He found himself repeating her words, and there came to him a sudden comprehension of his own ecstasies. He was alone! The long nightmare had passed. The chorus of greedy, peevish voices had ceased. In its place were all these wonderful things. His eyes wandered languorously. The skiff was making fine progress now, the girl invisible, the boatman with the tiller in his hand, and his pipe lit, also recumbent. Broader and broader the streak of silver widened towards that distant blue line of the sea. A puff of wind brought him a taste of its saltiness. He moved a little, and looked away inland, to golden fields where the corn leaned lazily before the south wind, green meadows, grey stone and red-tiled farmhouses, a distant church, square towered, crumbling with age, but still one of the sentinel towers of the lonely coast. His lark had come back to sing to him. The gurgle of the water had become a ripple. Other white-winged boats were stealing down the waterway. At the distant quay there was a pleasant little stir of humanity. Full on him shone the sun. In his ears, with the strengthening of the wind, came also the rustling of the grasses. Again, as he had done for many hours in the last few mornings, Peter Cradd slept—and he slept to music.

The next morning he made his way on to the

quay at the turn of the tide, and accosted Large, the one-armed boatman.

" Some day," he said, " when you're not engaged, I should like to hire your boat."

The man nodded assent.

" I do generally hang about until this time," he confided, " to see if the young lady she wants to go out. She's likely here about now if she does. If she don't come, say in five minutes, I'll take you with pleasure. You be fond of sailing, mister ? "

" I don't know much about it," Peter Cradd confessed. " I love the sea and the sunshine and the quiet down here."

" You be from the city perhaps ? "

Cradd nodded.

" A Londoner maybe ? "

" A Londoner."

" Must seem quiet to you a-nights down here."

" It's like heaven," was the almost passionate response.

The man looked up at him curiously. They had all noticed him about—a strange, pleasant-faced little gentleman who had come down looking like a ghost, but whose rapidly acquired sunburn and increasing clearness of the eyes seemed every day to be giving him a fresh vitality. He had made his first appearance in a worn, ready-made business suit. The last few days no one had seen any trace of it. He was now wearing a fisherman's jersey, a pair of shorts bought in the village, and sand shoes. Even at that moment he looked down at himself and chuckled at the thought of his costume.

" You're not taking my boat ? " a startled voice demanded in his ear.

He turned round. The young lady of the day

before had made her appearance, swinging a towel and bathing suit, and carrying a small brown paper packet. She was looking at him in genuine alarm.

"Not for the world," he assured her hastily. "I was just telling the boatman here that one day when you weren't wanting him I might like to go out."

"That was very nice of you," she acknowledged. "I'm rather later this morning. I went to buy a bathing dress."

"Well, Large was very faithful to you," he told her good-humouredly. "He said he always waited first to see whether you turned up."

She studied him for a moment appraisingly. There was something irresistibly pleasant in the kindliness of his face, his clear eyes, and sensitive mouth. The pinched look which he had worn for many years was passing. Peter Cradd in his natural state was not at all an ill-looking fellow.

"Can you swim?" she asked him.

"Well, I used to be able to," was the doubtful reply. "I have done a little at swimming baths the last few years. I haven't really seen the sea since I can remember."

"You look as though you were enjoying it," she observed.

"I am enjoying every moment of it. If I were to try to tell you how much," he went on, with a smile, "it would take so long that you would miss the tide."

"Would you like to come with me?" she invited. "There's plenty of room for two, and you can get a bathing suit from Large's sister there—the first shop on the left."

"Sure you wouldn't mind?" he asked wistfully.

" Remember what you said yesterday? I thought of it so much."

" About being alone ? "

He nodded.

" I have a feeling," she continued, " that I would be just as much alone with you there. We won't get in the way of one another's thoughts. I don't think you'll say the things to me I'm tired of hearing, and I'm quite sure I shan't be a bother to you."

" I won't keep you," he promised her.

In less than five minutes he arrived with a small parcel under his arm. She spread out her rug, Large managed to produce another one which did for a pillow, and side by side they glided down the waterway. To-day they were a little later, and there was no mud to be feared. They zigzagged down the broadening streak, and each time their tacks were longer until at last they sailed in a fair breeze, and Peter Cradd opened his eyes with the sheer joy of the motion. Up till then neither of them had spoken. The girl lay as though she slept. PeterCraddglanced towards herwith a little tremor. Her long throat with its " V "-shaped coating of brown, was soft and agreeable to look at. Her jersey frankly displayed her girlish figure. Her bare legs were drawn slightly up, and her pretence at a skirt left them visible well above the knees. He looked at her almost stealthily. For the first time for many years he felt a strange, pleasant stirring of the senses of which he was half ashamed and yet which he hugged all the time to his bosom. She was part of the new and splendid things of life. These vague and indescribable emotions with which she had suddenly inspired him were part of the new world, the singing of uncaged larks, the rustling of the wind in the corn, the gurgle of the sea, the sweet

caress of the sunshine. They seemed all woven into this new existence of beauty and rest, so grateful to his tired soul. An angel could only have smiled at his thoughts, yet Peter Cradd blushed under his tan when he suddenly found her looking at him with wide-open eyes.

"So you're awake," she remarked.

The friendliness of her tone filled him with a great relief.

"To tell you the truth," he confided, "when I am out of doors like this, I never know whether I am awake or asleep."

She nodded.

"I know what it is to feel like that. I know just what you mean. You're odd, aren't you? Look down and see how deep the water is."

"About five feet, I should think," he speculated. "What do you say, Large?"

"It's plenty deep enough for a bathe," the boatman replied. "I can hold over a rope if you like. Sweet water it be, with a sandy bottom."

"Come on," the girl proposed, getting up. "Let's."

Peter Cradd was filled with a great embarrassment. The girl probably noticed it, for she laughed at him.

"You go over by Large," she pointed out, "and we shall have the sail between us. It won't take me a second to get into my things. In fact I've got my knickers on now."

Peter Cradd did as he was bidden. To say the least of it, the shelter of the sail was slightly inadequate, and there was one moment, when it suddenly flapped over, that he experienced a sudden thrill half of pleasure, half of confusion. She had just begun to drag the top part of her costume over her head. He looked away with the uneasy sense

that she was laughing at him. A moment later he heard the ripple of her laughter—a very pleasant sound it was too.

"All clear," she announced. "I'm quite decent. We shan't want shoes, shall we? You're sure you can help me?"

"Let me get over first and experiment," he begged. "Remember it's a long time since I tried."

Then again came one of the great, sweet joys of this new phase of living. He dived carefully into the blue, limpid water, felt it all round him, felt the gentle buoyancy of it as it lifted him up, and he lay for a moment upon his back. He stretched out his arms, and moved a few strokes—the sun on his face, the water like a velvety couch about him. He turned over, and swam round the boat. Every stroke was a delight. He was conscious of a strength which he had never dreamed of in his limbs, a great desire to embrace with his body this new and wonderful sensation.

"Oh, you're all right, I can see," the girl exclaimed cheerfully. "Look out—I'm coming!"

She came in rather clumsily, spluttered a good deal, but with a touch of his hand rose to the surface. Side by side they swam out, Large following them in the boat a few lengths behind. Neither of them spoke. Peter Cradd was too happy even to think. Only one faint reflection came to him—that he had perhaps found one other person in the world who shared his passionate need of rest. She swam slowly, but with an ecstatic expression upon her face. With his help, asked for by a dumb gesture, she turned on her back, and it seemed to him that she was thrilled too with that same desire which had sung its way through his blood—to give himself to the ocean, to realise in faint,

emotional fashion, the deep cravings of the sea lovers of the world.

Large called out to them at last.

"I say, folks, you've been in half an hour. Ain't that long enough?"

They swam to the side of the boat. Large's great right hand dragged them in, and they lay white and glistening once more side by side.

"Don't let's change," she begged. "Let's dry like this."

Peter Cradd, who had always been a little careful of his health, because of what an illness must entail, and wore goloshes on a wet day as far as the bus, laughed happily as he stretched himself out. The taste of the salt was in his mouth, the burn of it upon his body. She threw a little of the rug over his legs.

"My, you're white!" she exclaimed. "You want to do this by degrees. Here!"

She produced a bottle, and, kneeling by his side, rubbed his legs with some sort of oil. He lay in a divine trance. Every touch of her fingers was marvellous. When she had finished, she did the same thing to her own, although they were already a pleasant shade of brown. Then once more they glided off towards that distant line of blue. Large was looking around him with the all-comprehensive survey of the seaman.

"I think I'll just land you at Seagull's Island for your luncheon," he suggested. "Miss has been there before. It's a rare place for resting awhile."

"A paradise," the girl murmured lazily.

"Heavens, I haven't brought any luncheon!" Peter Cradd exclaimed. "Not that it matters at all," he went on hastily. "I never care about eating in the middle of the day. Can one get anything at Seagull's Island?"

Large grinned.

"There's plenty of seagulls, if you can catch some," he said, "but they ain't so powerful good to eat."

The girl smiled reassuringly.

"I've heaps," she declared. "I always leave half mine, and Large brings his own. We've got some water too somewhere."

Her companion remembered the size of the parcel, and scoffed at the idea.

"I'll wait until I get home," he insisted, "but I'll love to lie down and have a nap whilst you eat your sandwiches."

"We'll see," she murmured drowsily. "Isn't it lovely to feel your things drying on you like this."

"Heavenly," he agreed.

They met a stronger wind for a few minutes, went across on another tack, and finally glided into a shallow pool, rocky and shingled. Large let down the anchor, and the girl rose reluctantly to her feet.

"Get out carefully," she advised her companion. "It's a rough bottom."

At Large's suggestion they put on their shoes and scrambled ashore on to a small grass-tufted spit of land—a swamp in the wet season swept by every tide, a pleasant little oasis now with shade if one needed it on the far side of the hillocks. Large followed them in his sea boots, handed the girl her packet of sandwiches, and jerked his thumb across towards a distant hillock.

"I'll take my pipe and a bite there, missie," he announced. "The gentleman can just give a holloa when you're ready."

They found a perfect spot in a sandy hollow, with their backs to the wind, and their faces to the sea and the sun. At her bidding, Peter Cradd untied

the string of her parcel. There were four sandwiches of reasonable size, two of beef and two of ham, a somewhat withered-looking apple, and a slice of cake.

"You can have the sandwiches," the girl invited. "I'll take the cake and the apple. That will be quite enough for me."

He divided the sandwiches, waving away her remonstrances, and leaving her the cake and the apple.

"I have no right to anything," he protested. "I feel rather greedy as it is. Perhaps you'll let me give you some tea when we get back?"

"Rather!" she agreed, taking a bite out of one of her sandwiches. "Makes you hungry, this bathing, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed," he assented. "By-the-by, doesn't it seem a little quaint that I don't even know your name? Mine is Peter Cradd."

"I like the Peter," she observed. "Mine's Eileen Bates. So you're from London?"

"Yes," he admitted. "And so are you?"

She nodded.

"Business in Cannon Street, home at Stoke Newington. Doesn't sound very exciting, does it?"

"I've been living in Ealing, and I think that's worse," he told her. "My business was in Bermondsey, but I've given it up."

"Retired?"

"Yes," he acknowledged—"I think I may say that I have retired."

They ate in silence for several moments. He watched her strong, white teeth, which crunched through the apple, when she arrived at that stage of her meal, with shameless noise and vigour.

"When you say that you're in business," he ventured, a little timidly, "what do you do?"

"The usual job," she yawned, "secretary typist. They sometimes say I'm a secretary when the boss has a buyer in he wants to impress, and a typist when it comes to pay day."

Peter Cradd chuckled. A similar situation had existed in his late offices in Bermondsey.

"I suppose mine's a good enough job as it goes," she reflected, throwing away the core of her apple, after she had glanced round it to see if there was another mouthful. "I get enough to live on, and enough to pay something at home. Get taken out sometimes, too, and a few presents of course. Life goes on all right whilst you're there. You fit into it, and you seem to belong. It's when you get away to places like this, and look back, you begin to wonder if there isn't something pretty rotten about it?"

"Go on, please," he begged. "I love to hear you talk."

She leaned a little farther back, her hands meeting behind her head, with its cluster of soft brown hair.

"Well, what I mean is," she explained, "I don't think girls have any right in the City at all. It's a putrid sort of game. It's all right in a big drapery establishment, or anywhere where there are hundreds of you together, but in a City office it's pretty rotten. They look you over on your first day, from the office boy to the cashier, and you know exactly what's in their minds."

Peter Cradd stirred uneasily upon his sand bed. He was not used to young women who talked so frankly—in fact he had never met one before.

"They all want the same thing, of course," she went on, a little resentfully. "The boss has the first chance, because he can keep you after hours, or give you a holiday, or raise your salary, or anything

of that sort. Then if he's not that kind, or if he's otherwise engaged—although sometimes that doesn't seem to make any difference—then the cashier comes along, or the town travellers, and after them the clerks. Sometimes the office boy's the biggest nuisance of the lot. Ours bought two new neckties the week before I came away, and he was always worrying me to go and see his mother, who lives at Highgate."

Peter Cradd chuckled.

"But after all," he ventured, "they can't bully you into anything, can they? What I mean to say is, you're not obliged to stand any nonsense from them. You look to me," he added, "like a girl who could take very good care of herself."

"Oh, I can take care of myself all right," she admitted, her voice growing a little lazier. "The trouble is, is it worth while? You take care of yourself, and your salary stays where it is. You're 'Miss Bates' all the time, instead of 'Eileen,' and you never get that little pat on the hand now and then which is certain to mean a box of chocolates at least. You never get a present of any sort. If there's anything goes wrong with your work there's no one to stick up for you. You never get taken out. No one asks you when your birthday is. You have to buy all your own little luxuries, and if the staff has to be reduced you're the first to go. The choice is up to you all right. You can draw your hand away if the boss wants to hold it for a minute, or turn your lips away if he comes too near, and you can refuse a little dinner and a visit to the cinema with the salesman, or a supper and a dance with the cashier, but the question is, is it worth while? There are thousands of girls who can take down letters and type them well, and do my job—plenty of them waiting for it if my people get bored

with me. You see, Mr. Cradd," she went on, her voice growing drowsier and drowsier, " even a working girl has her problems in life."

" I wonder," he said, a little nervously, " how you deal with yours ? "

There was no reply. He turned his head. Miss Eileen Bates had fallen asleep.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER IV

PETER CRADD would have slept if he could, but a queer sort of nervousness possessed him. He lay stretched out, with a very large portion of his body exposed to the sun and the wind, and he listened to the flow of the sea and the screech of the gulls, and the murmur of the wind in the long grasses, but more than anything he was aware of the young woman who lay sleeping by his side. Her scanty costume revealed a body which was certainly the most beautiful he had ever seen. The suppressed artist in him gloried in the curve of her hips, in her long straight legs, in the slight but ample contour of her bosoms. Unfortunately for Peter Cradd's self-respect, the man in him also took note of these things, took full and generous note. Hence the restlessness. There was a singing and a warmth in his blood which was certainly new to Mr. Peter Cradd, of 17 Park Avenue, Ealing. His daily life had been such a dry-as-dust, dreary affair, that he had found no time for such thoughts as were now forcing their way into his consciousness. Only a few weeks ago, he had thought that such as life was, such as its possibilities were for him, he had found and outlived them, and now, here was something altogether different. Here was a different range of emotions, a new, strange recrudescence of the earlier

passions of his youth. Something grossly improper, of course, in a man of his years—a married man, too—but there they were. He had not sought them. They must have come as the result of something in him which had lain dormant during those long years of struggle.

He turned his eyes away, with an effort, from that beautiful young sleeping body by his side, and, lying on his back, he speculated. Even in the narrow confines of his life, he had come across men who had managed to live what was called " the gay life "—bachelors, some of them, errant husbands others. He had never felt any inclination to follow their example. His fidelity to his drab and dreary wife he had taken for granted. He had experienced no spark of feeling for her for longer than he could remember. When he came to think of it, she had never sought to excite it, never by any movement or action or glance tried to capture his fancy or provoke an instant's admiration. What had happened between them had happened as a matter of routine, just because everyone with a wife who lived in a terrace and went to business six days in the week, lay in bed a little later on a Sunday morning, and mowed the grass if he had a lawn, on one particular day, performed his other domestic duties with a similar lack of enthusiasm when the time arrived.

In those years of struggle, Peter Cradd's imagination had grown grey, and the actual business of loving or being loved had no concern for him. The recent shortening of woman's skirts, the more lavish display of her person which had provoked an uneasy and deeper sense of sex amongst many of his friends, had left him entirely unmoved. He was Mr. Peter Cradd, with a family growing up, an insufficient income, with leather to sell in the day-

time, and sleep to court at night lest he should wake weary and unable to press with eager feet the tread-mill of life on the morrow. Yet, as he lay there, he wondered whether he had ever known the real Peter Cradd, whether he had not been, after all, a crushed victim of circumstances. Perhaps they were all like that, those men in his avenue, and in a hundred more avenues of the world—moral, unimaginative, grey, because the fight to keep their places in life absorbed every thought. If that were so, then, he reflected, morality was only relative. Perhaps he was going to start life as a sinner, or a would-be sinner.

He turned his head once more, and he felt a little shiver of delight as he caught the faint smile upon her closed lips, watched the rise and fall of her bosom, glanced once more at the beautiful curve of her legs. Then, with a sudden start, he remembered his age. What an old fool to be harbouring such thoughts, and to be looking with a beating heart at a girl half his age! Of course she was attractive, but what was that to him—a middle-aged leather salesman—even if he had stumbled into wealth? Her future was obviously to marry some rising young clerk or salesman, furnish a villa, feel all the transports of love in the spring-time of life, the joy of having children, watching them grow up. That was what she was for. And supposing the struggle was hard, and she grew like Harriet? He shivered. It was a horrible thought. And yet, Harriet had been good-looking enough in her way when she had manœuvred him into marrying her. It was a life which might lead to drabness, might mean the humdrum existence which was the great cemetery of imagination, the funeral pyre of all the finer joys of life. . . .

A sudden perfume of wild lavender came floating

down the breeze. The sun had begun to burn his legs, a strange bird was singing somewhere overhead. Peter Cradd's brief period of speculation was finished. His mind ceased to work, his senses, glowing with a new and vibrant warmth, took possession of him. Eileen had opened her eyes. She was leaning over towards him, laughing a little, her fingers buried in the cool sand.

"You're a funny man," she said. "I told you all about myself, and you listened, and scarcely opened your lips. Tell me about yourself."

"There is nothing to tell," he assured her, wondering at the sudden thickness in his speech.

She turned over a little nearer to him.

"You look at me as though you liked me," she murmured. "Do you?"

"Very much."

A cloud passed across her face.

"I used to enjoy it when men looked at me that way," she sighed. "I don't think I do so much now. I suppose—oh well, what's it matter? Your name is Mr. Peter Cradd, you have just retired from business. Are you married?"

"Yes."

She seemed surprised.

"Children?"

"Three," he answered. "Fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen."

"Quite a family man," she remarked, letting the sand drip through her fingers.

"I suppose so," he admitted.

"What would they say if they saw you lying here with me—both of us nearly half naked?" she went on, with a downward glance at her legs.

He reflected for a moment. Then he began to laugh, softly at first, until little lines spread themselves at the sides of his eyes.

" I don't know," he admitted. " Nothing of the sort has ever happened before. I can't imagine what they would think."

" Why are you taking your holiday alone?" she asked.

" Well, one reason perhaps is that they wouldn't care for this sort of holiday. They all have the same tastes. They like to go where there is a pier, and a cinema, and shops and crowds of people to look at. I have been wanting to do just what I am doing now, without perhaps ever realising it, all my life. It has just become possible."

" Kind of different from your folks, are you?" she asked.

" Entirely," he assured her.

She was lying upon her side now, facing him, with her elbow in the sand.

" I shouldn't have taken you for a salesman of anything," she said. " If you had told me you were one of these men from the colleges, or a schoolmaster, or something of that sort, I shouldn't have been a bit surprised. Sometimes you look as though you knew an awful lot, and sometimes you look like a baby."

" I know nothing at all," he told her slowly. " I know nothing of life itself, nothing of books, or art, or anything that counts. I am just a poor ignoramus who's groped his way through life, and suddenly come to a standstill."

" A standstill?" she repeated, her tone full of interest. " Tell me, please, what you mean, because I, too—I am rather at a standstill."

" I have been a plodder," he explained, " just doing my day's work to try to keep a roof over my head, and at the end of the day too tired to do anything else, too tired to think, too tired to hope, too tired to try to look through any other window

of life except the grimy panes of the one in front of me. Then—it seems a strange thing to make so much difference—money came."

"Money!" she exclaimed eagerly. "You are rich then?"

"Yes," he admitted. "For about a fortnight I have been a rich man."

"You don't look it," she ventured.

He smiled.

"I didn't stop to think much about clothes, I just arranged so that the people at home should have all they wanted, and I ran away."

"Do you mean to say," she demanded blankly, "that your people don't know where you are?"

"Haven't an idea," he assured her, with a twinkle in his eyes. "It's the first escapade of my life."

"Do you like it?"

"It's heaven."

She plucked a long blade of grass, and sucked it thoughtfully.

"Seems quaint!" she observed. "Rich! Why didn't you go to one of the swell hotels, and have a good time?"

He eyed her meditatively. Her question somehow disappointed him, but it was quite serious.

"This happened to be just what I wanted to do," he confided. "You're having the same sort of holiday yourself."

She nodded.

"That's true," she admitted, "but then you see I had to have this sort of one, or else——"

"Or else what?"

"Never mind. The real reason I chose this was because I wanted to get away from men."

"Then what about me?"

She laughed.

"Well, perhaps you're my failure," she confessed, "or perhaps you don't count very much. I mean," she went on, "it was the men all round one in the City whose eyes were always asking the same thing in the same horrid way, and who were always making the same stupid suggestions—as though a girl were a fool. It's all right at first—flattering and all that. I don't pretend a girl doesn't like to be asked out, but it goes on and on until you know that every man who comes into the place and talks to you for five minutes, and every man you meet when you're out, is presently going to ask the same sort of question in the same sort of way—and I got fed up with it, and that's why I'm here."

His eyes were full of gentle sympathy.

"You can't think out your way through life very well in a city," he observed.

"Oh, I haven't many thoughts," the girl acknowledged. "Sometimes I think I haven't got a brain at all. I'm just a sort of healthy human animal, I suppose, but there are times when one gets sick to death of being what one is, and of knowing what everyone wants from you. Not shocking you, am I, Mr. Peter Cradd?"

"Not at all," he answered. "I'm very interested."

"Well, anyway," she concluded, "that's why I came away, and my holiday will soon be over, and I've loved it, and whatever happens to me afterwards I shall still have loved it. What's the matter with old Large?"

The boatman came to them across the sandy ledges, shouting.

"Wind's freshening a bit, folks. We'd best be getting along, or we might have to draw round the narrows, and that will mean you won't be home until night."

They rose obediently. She stretched herself—her arms sunwards.

"I'll remember our little picnic spot," she sighed. "What a pity one can't bring a tent and stay here."

He made no reply. There was a surge in his blood, a thickness in his throat, another wild chasing of ideas through his mind. He had an insane desire to say something which he felt would have somehow spoilt the whole glorious day, so he held his peace. Nevertheless, she looked at him a little curiously as they made their way down to the boat.

"You don't seem to have much wind," she remarked. "Is your heart groggy?"

"Feels like it to-day," he admitted. . . .

The wind fell away, and they drifted home in quiet and pleasant fashion. The girl seemed entirely inanimate. Peter Cradd had the feeling of having passed through a queer turbulence of thought and sensations, impossible to tabulate, or even to understand. They lay supine, with the salt spray sometimes falling in wet flecks upon their faces, the wind now less exciting, the sun low in the sky. Before them lay the long stretch of wooded country, the ripening cornfields, the haycocks, the flower-wreathed hedges, and on each side the long stretches of marsh land, studded with glittering pools, mauve here and there with patches of wild lavender, yellow in one particular spot with great clumps of golden buttercups. Half-way down the estuary, she sat up.

"Did you say you were going to take me to tea?" she asked.

"It would give me great pleasure," he replied.

"Then we'd better get into our clothes," she suggested.

He rose carefully, steadying himself by the mast.

She leaned forward, and he caught a glimpse, between the rough sweater and the skirt, of something faintly pink, a quaint little garment such as he had never seen before in his life. Or had he not seen it once before, he wondered, on the waxen lady whose fixed eyes had mocked him as he hurried past to his bus? He staggered away aft to where Large was enjoying his lazy afternoon pipe, the tiller in his hand almost a dumb thing.

"Going to change my clothes," Peter Cradd explained.

The boatman nodded.

"We'll be in in half an hour, sir," he volunteered.

Tea, curiously enough, was a somewhat constrained meal. It was sufficiently plentiful, served at the one big hotel of the place, a simple, unpretentious-looking building, by a moderately attentive waiter who gauged with the correctness of his class the status of his customers, but knew nothing about Mr. Peter Cradd's latest stroke of luck. The window looked over the sea, and the girl's eyes kept straying there. Presently she asked her companion a question.

"What are you going to do with all your money?"

"I wish I knew," he replied. "Just at present I feel that more than anything else in the world I should like to buy Ben Large and his boat, and the cottage I'm living in, and stay here for the rest of my life."

"You couldn't buy Ben Large's boat without me," she declared. "I'm part of it. He wouldn't let it to anyone else whilst I was here."

"Then I think I should like to take you too," he decided.

She looked at him across the table.

"I daresay you'd be quite nice," she said abruptly. "Up to now, I like you very much, Mr. Peter Cradd."

"I hope you always will," he answered.

"I hope I shall."

"I am developing," Peter Cradd remarked, as he helped himself to strawberry jam, "a great curiosity in life now that I have a little time to think about it. Why do you like me, Miss Eileen? I am plain of feature, and halting in speech. I have read no books—I am very ignorant. I know nothing about taking young ladies around. I even forgot to order a table in the window until you reminded me."

"I think I like you," she pronounced deliberately, "because you're different. You have nice quiet blue eyes, and the one thing I've grown to hate I haven't seen in them once. You've talked to me nicely, too. You didn't try even to hold my hand when we were on the island. If you only knew," she sighed, "how tired I am of people who always want to hold my hand."

"It may have been only shyness, not niceness," he ventured.

"Then I love you for the shyness," she laughed. . . .

Afterwards he walked with her to the cottage where she lodged.

"What about to-morrow?" he asked.

It seemed to him there was a touch of regret in her tone as she answered.

"I'm going for a picnic with my landlady and her two nieces. They invited me a week ago. We are going to a farm where some of the family live."

"Can I have your boat then?"

She made a little grimace.

mitted, as they paused before a small table upon which were several bottles. " I went round to the barman at the hotel to-day, and he told me I'd better be content with a mixed vermouth. We've got plenty of ice, anyhow. Will that do ? "

" I should say so ! " she acquiesced cheerfully. " I only have cocktails in London when I get taken out. I certainly haven't had one down here, and I shall love a mixed vermouth. Here, let me make it. I know I'm more used to it than you are."

She poured the vermouths into an ice-frozen tumbler, stirred vigorously for a moment with a long spoon, cut off little strips of lemon, and poured out the amber liquid.

" Our first real drink together, Mr. Peter Cradd," she reminded him demurely. " Your very good health."

" And yours, Miss Eileen," he responded, raising his glass to his lips.

The constraint had gone. He began to feel quite young, almost as though he had been used to giving supper parties to young lady secretaries all his life —a thing which, as a matter of fact, he had never previously done. There was a lobster upon the table, two cold chickens, and some ham and lettuce upon an improvised sideboard.

" I do hope you won't mind," he asked anxiously. " You'll have to be content with my waiting upon you. The old lady whom I engage to look after me has had to go to Norwich—a sister's ill or something."

She shot a quick glance at him. For a moment there was an uneasy light in her eyes. The simplicity of his expression, however, reassured her. He did not even guess at her thoughts as he pushed a telegram across the table. She read it mechanically :

Acc No 1853

"*Sister better but please excuse until to-morrow. Return to get your lunch. Skidmore.*"

"Lunch should not want much getting," she observed, as she took her place at the table. "Two chickens indeed! Ostentatious, I call it. You'll have enough cold things for our picnic to-morrow."

"Are we going picnicking to-morrow?" he asked eagerly.

"Why not? There's only one sailing-boat worth going in, and as we both of us want it, isn't it much better to be friendly? I'll come round and pack for you after breakfast if you like. You're certain to forget the salt or something. Oh, where on earth did you get that from?"

Peter Cradd had produced a bottle of champagne from under the table. He looked at it a little shamefacedly.

"From the barman. I don't know much about champagne myself. I hope it's good."

He tore off the gold foil, and attempted to twist the wire. All the time she watched him through slightly narrowed eyes. In a way she knew perfectly well that it made very little difference, and yet she wanted so much to believe in him. Housekeeper away—cocktails—champagne! The wiles of Piccadilly repeated in Arcadia! Then she found herself laughing at him. His efforts with the champagne bottle were pitiable.

"I've never opened a bottle of champagne before," he apologised. "I suppose one ought to have some sort of an implement."

Again she came to the rescue. She twisted the wires with the end of a fork, and cut the strings. He watched her strong, capable fingers, bending this way and that, with a queer sort of fascinated interest. Presently the wine came bubbling out, and she resumed her place.

"Give me some of that lobster, please," she begged. "I've been wanting one all the week, but they're hard to get here."

At carving he was more at home, and presently the feast was in progress. The chickens were delicious, and the salad fresh from the walled kitchen garden.

"Rather different to my poor little feast," she laughed.

"I enjoyed your two sandwiches quite as much as anything I have ever eaten in my life," he assured her.

Her eyes twinkled as she looked across at him.

"We both seem more formal somehow," she observed. "I suppose it's sitting up at a table and wearing so many clothes."

"Let's forget," he suggested daringly.

"If one could!" she sighed. "I don't think," she went on, a moment later, "that I have much imagination. I can never get away from the real things, can you, Mr. Cradd?"

"I have never had time to try," he answered simply. "The only rest I have had for many years has been in bed, and then I have just wanted to go to sleep as quickly as possible."

"This holiday must be doing you lots of good," she said.

"Is it a holiday?" he murmured dreamily. "To me it's like the beginning of a new life."

"Unhappy at home, eh?"

"Home?" He repeated the word as though it were an unfamiliar one to him. "I suppose that means the roof under which one lives, or I should say that I had never had one."

"You're quaint, aren't you?" she remarked curiously. "What set you thinking like this all of a sudden?"

"My new freedom," he acknowledged. "The joy of it comes to me in great gulps every day. Every morning when I rise, through the hours when I lie in the sunshine, at night when I get into bed. My bed is drawn up to that window," he went on, pointing to above the flower-wreathed porch. "I can lie there and watch the stars. Lately there has been a moon, too, coming up round the Point there. There are two lighthouses—one a flash-light—I can see by bending over a little. I lie and watch these until I go to sleep."

"What do you do all the time? Think?"

"I don't believe I think at all, I just rest."

"I expect you've had a hard life," she decided, holding out her glass whilst he filled it.

"Something very much like hell," he confided. "Don't let's talk about it. It's too near. Sometimes I dream, and the horror of it all comes back. Tell me about yourself."

"I wouldn't for the world," she answered quickly.

"Why not?" he asked. "Not that I want to be inquisitive at all. I know how humdrum and commonplace office life seems, but heavens, mine's been much worse than yours could have been! A few months ago you might have met me any day in the suburbs of London, or in Bristol or Norwich or Leicester, trotting behind a little truck filled with bundles of leather, standing with my hat off to beg for an interview with a manufacturer whose only idea as a rule was to get rid of me as soon and as unpleasantly as he could. I wonder I've anything left in my veins that one could call blood," he continued. "I wonder all the courage hasn't been crushed out of me. And home! I never told you how I hated my own people, did I?"

"Hush!" she protested. "You mustn't talk like that."

"But it's true," he insisted, with almost feverish emphasis, as a reminiscent wave of the old agony surged up from his wounded consciousness. "I know it's wicked, but it's true. I hate my wife. She's terrible—terrible to look at, terrible in her thoughts, terrible in every little thing she does. As to my two sons—George may turn out to be something, but Henry—well, I ought to have put a stone round his neck and drowned him when he was a boy—and Lena—no one can do anything with Lena. She's just self, self, self, going her own way, smothering her face with cosmetics, jumping at the chance of going to a cinema, or play, with any young man who'll take her, despising her home, mocking at me because my clothes were shabby and my job was poor. There was nothing to be done with her or with any of them. They were just inevitable—just as it would have been inevitable but for this amazing thing that happened to me, that in a year or two's time I should have forgotten to get up one morning, and turned my face to the wall, and felt queer things inside me, and the doctor would have said 'Heart failure, just fatigue, that's all—weariness.' If you don't want to live, the time comes when you don't live any longer."

"Chuck it!" she admonished. "You're the dreariest supper companion I ever had. Help yourself to some more of that wine."

He obeyed her apologetically.

"Remember," he said, "it was you yourself who took me back to the past. Now there are times when I am dazed with happiness. It's the new life—it's just the contrast, that's all, made me bitter for a moment."

"Are you never going back to your people?" she asked.

"Never in this life," was the fervid reply. "They shall share in the money all right—I am seeing to that already—and they can go their own damned way."

She laughed indulgently across the table.

"Naughty!" she murmured. "You shouldn't use swear words about your people."

"You go and call on them when you get back—no, for God's sake don't do that," he broke off suddenly. "That's one of my troubles, to keep them from knowing where I am. They think I'm in New Zealand. Now can't you tell me a little more about yourself."

She shook her head.

"I'm not like you," she pointed out. "Whatever my life may be, I'm still living it, and whilst I'm here I want to forget."

The meal was over. He fetched the cigarettes, and moved their chairs a little on one side. Twilight had fallen without their noticing it. The dim lamps of the old-fashioned harbour were already burning. In the far distance they saw the first flash from the lighthouse at the mouth of the estuary. Such breeze as there had been had fallen, and the trees in the garden were stark and motionless against the deep blue sky. One or two stars appeared, but eastward there was a bank of clouds.

"How beautiful it smells here," the girl remarked, leaning back with her eyes half closed. "Some day I'd like to see the garden."

"You shall see all over the place at any time you like."

She stretched out her hand for a match, and glanced at him under her eyelids. Once more she breathed a little sigh of relief.

Peter Cradd was very happy, and there was a touch almost of spirituality in his face as his eyes

drank in the placid beauty of the still night. She lit her cigarette, and patted his hand before she sank back again into her chair.

"Do you know, I think you're very nice," she said. "I wish there were more men in the world like you."

He looked at her gratefully. It was many years since anyone had patted his hand of their own accord, and paid him a compliment.

"My dear," he sighed, "I'm afraid I don't count for much—a pretty negative sort of person."

"I don't agree," she murmured, her eyes following the arc of light that flashed across the estuary. "I sometimes think that men are more lovable for the bad qualities they don't possess than for the good ones they do. All the good people I've met have been such prigs, and so unsympathetic."

"I've never thought about myself much," Peter Cradd confessed—"perhaps because I'm just ordinary. I haven't many virtues or many vices that I know of. I shouldn't think there could be a more ordinary person than I am."

She threw away her cigarette.

"Show me the house, please," she begged abruptly.

He rose to his feet at once.

"It's simple," he said, "but I love it."

They passed into the little hall, littered with fishing rods and fishing nets, a few good prints upon the dark red walls. The largest room was the library. They walked its entire length, looking at the books which filled the cases, and some old engravings. Her hand rested lightly upon his shoulder. Once her head almost touched his as they paused to admire a beautiful copy of Andrea del Sarto's Madonna. It was all very typical of an English country vicarage—good furniture,

almost worn out, a few well-chosen trifles, and books—too many of them ecclesiastical, but with a fair sprinkling of the modern classics. In the little drawing-room, sweet with the odour of the heliotrope which drooped in through the windows, were some fragments of Georgian furniture, covered with faded amber damask.

"I think it's sweet," she declared, as they lingered for a moment in the hall. "I love all that old, smelly furniture."

They stood there for a moment, motionless. It was almost as though each were searching for what might be in the other's thoughts. Suddenly she felt an immense and wondering sympathy for this the strangest person she had ever known in her life. His hand was trembling. She felt that with all his strength he was struggling against some emotion. His fingers, which touched hers, as though by accident, were burning. She drew a little closer to him, conscious of a queer, protective instinct such as one might feel towards a lonely child. He was a queer wanderer amongst the by-ways, someone who had been denied the heritage of life. For the first time there was genuine affection in her smile.

"Don't you want to show me where you lie and watch the lighthouses?" she asked quietly.

He turned resolutely away.

"One can see just as well from the garden," he answered. "I'd like—it's hot in the house. Let's sit out of doors."

He opened the front door a little wider. His fingers almost bruised her wrist as he drew her after him.

"Forgive me," he continued awkwardly. "You see I'm not yet quite a sane person. Was I rough? I'm sorry. Isn't this air wonderful? I believe

there's going to be a breeze in a few minutes if those clouds mount any higher."

She said nothing. She just followed him out, sank into her chair, and held his hand. They counted the striking of a distant church clock.

"Only nine o'clock," she murmured. "Cigarettes, please, and shall we finish the champagne?"

He helped her unsteadily, struck a match for her cigarette, and lit one himself. He had moved his chair, as though by accident, a little farther away, but she laughed, and made him replace it.

"Don't let's be silly," she begged. "You're like a great child, Peter Cradd, and I love you for it. We will sit here until the moon gets over that tree."

Peace of a sort returned to Peter Cradd, but it was peace mingled with something of that vague torturing longing which the midday sun on Seagull's Island had burned into passion.

"I wish I could tell you of my life," she continued smoothing his hand, "but you're such a baby. I know that now. I did doubt it a little, and I hate myself now for doubting. I like you, Mr. Cradd."

"And I like you," he answered, looking into her eyes. "No one has ever been so sweet to me. I can't—I can't tell you just what I feel. I would like to, and yet I wouldn't like to."

"Don't try," she begged. "You see, although you are—how old did you say?"

"Forty-six," he told her.

"Forty-six years old, you're like a child who has never left the nursery! You know why, I suppose? Well, you wouldn't admit it if you did. I'll tell you. You're too unselfish. That's been just you. Other men with your miserable home life would

have taken to drink, or any sort of dissipation, just to get some feeling into living, but there was your duty, and you settled down to do it—just did what was right for others. I wish I'd known someone like you before, Mr. Cradd."

"Before what?"

Her eyes were steadily watching the darkening waters. She said nothing, only her fingers tightened a little in their grasp.

"Anyhow," she concluded, "your time has come. Jolly well time too! Make the best of it, Mr. Cradd—Peter. You've a right to."

"I don't know what I shall do when you go," he said hoarsely. "You seem to understand so many things."

"To-morrow——"

She broke off. A tall figure had left the footpath, and, disdaining the gate, stepped over the low wall, and was crossing the lawn towards them. She watched him, frowning.

"It's John Nicholls, my landlady's nephew," she confided. "I don't know what he wants."

He came to a standstill before them, the same unwelcome person who had called her in from the street—a finely built young man, but rather loutish. His manner was half diffident, half defiant. He held out a telegram.

"Aunt thought I'd better bring you this down," he announced. "Might be important. If you want to send a reply, there's only quarter of an hour to telephone it to Norwich."

She took it from him, and tore open the envelope. By bending forward she could just decipher the writing. She was a long time reading. When she had finished, she half crumpled it up.

"There's no reply to-night," she said. "Thank you very much for bringing it."

"As I am here," he asked, "shall I see you home?"

"Thank you," she answered. "I'm not coming yet."

He kicked a pebble upon the path, and stood there stolidly.

"It's past nine o'clock," he pointed out, "and aunt don't like the door left unlocked. She always goes to bed at nine."

"I'm afraid that for once your aunt will have to put up with it," she remarked coldly. "I'm not ready to come home yet, and when I am, Mr. Cradd will bring me."

The young man swung boorishly away. Eileen seemed scarcely to notice his departure. She was sitting with the telegram crushed in her hand, still looking out seawards.

"No bad news, I hope?" Peter Cradd ventured to ask.

She flung the little ball of paper into a rose bush, and sprang to her feet with a swift, alert movement.

"Take me back, please," she begged, "only let's go the long way. Can't you see the breeze coming down the estuary there? We'll have it in our faces if we take the sea walk."

PETER CRADD lingered long over his undressing that night. Below was their supper table, with its many souvenirs of his visitor's disturbing presence —the champagne she had left in her glass, the cigarette half burned away, the handkerchief fallen upon the flagstones, of which he had possessed himself. And memories—the whole place

seemed filled with them. He had walked around the library, touched the same books, loitered in the same places, and now here he was up in his bedroom, his coat off, but his fingers reluctant to proclaim the finish of the day by dealing with the remainder of his clothes. He sat in a small easy-chair drawn up to the bed, and the room was filled with the perfume of the flowers which wafted through the open window, the heliotrope which had delighted them all through supper time, the jasmine, and now, in the freshening breeze, a faint tang of salt. Every few seconds the light flashed across the room—the great signal light from Blakeney Point. Presently, as he could see from where he sat, the moon would climb over that little plantation of scrubby pines, and would lay across his bed. He tried to think, and instead he dozed. . . . He woke with a start. Memories were indeed haunting him. Her voice came floating upward—her voice from near the chair where she had sat.

"Mr. Cradd! Please—Mr. Cradd!"

He sprang to his feet, pushed a little farther open the latticed window, and looked out, collarless and with unkempt hair.

"Come down, please, Mr. Cradd. It is Eileen."

He saw her standing there distinctly. She had evidently been hammering at the front door.

"Directly," he cried. "Directly!"

He tore on his collar, forgot his tie, but scrambled into his coat. He half slid, half ran down the smooth oak stairs, across the little hall, and out into the night. Eileen caught him by the hands.

"That brute!" she exclaimed. "That horrible woman!"

"Tell me what has happened," he insisted. "Sit down, dear."

He placed a chair for her. She was quivering

with anger, a spot of colour in her cheeks, a beautiful light in her eyes.

"Listen," she recounted; "that young man, that lout—Mrs. Nicholls's nephew—has made an idiot of himself about me ever since I arrived. What could I have to do with him, or he with me? To keep the peace I have tried to temporise. You see the rooms are clean and cheap, and I like it there. To-night—you know it was before ten when you left me at the corner of the street—I got to the door, and everything was dark. I tried the handle—I had been out as late before, walking about to see the moon come over the Point. The door was locked. I knocked and I knocked. I knocked at the windows. I called out. There was no reply. Everything was black and dark. At last Mrs. Chanders—she's the widow who lives next door—put her head out of her window. I could see she was chuckling. 'What's the matter with 'e?' she asked. 'Can't 'e get in?' 'They've locked me out,' I told her. 'I don't know why. It's only just past ten.' 'It be powerful late for a lassie,' the woman sniggered. Then I kicked the door, and shook the handle. I tried everything I could. No one stirred in the house, so at last I gave it up. I sat on your wall there for a long time. I thought I'd sleep under the pine trees, and then I thought I wouldn't. I thought I'd come to you. Please take me in, Mr. Cradd."

"The blackguard!" Peter Cradd exclaimed. "That sulky lout! That cur of a lad!"

"Hush!" she begged. "They know no better, these people. But what was I to do?"

"Just what you did, dear," he answered kindly.

There was champagne left in the bottle, and he gave her some. She became more normal.

"People like that," she declared passionately,

" ought not to be allowed to live. That young man, he is crazy, and he can do what he likes with his aunt. Very well, they wanted to drive me here. I've come. I'm not sorry, are you ? "

Peter Cradd was back again in that strange tur moil of the senses, all ache and desire and strange unanalysable conflict. He felt like a man stranded upon a floating cloud. He had no background. He scarcely knew even against what he was struggling, but the pain and joy of it were wonderful.

" I shouldn't worry any more about them," he advised. " They're impossible people—both aunt and nephew."

She linked her arm in his.

" I'm so sleepy," she whispered.

They went up the stairs arm in arm. His feet seemed to grow like lead. He took her into his room, and she looked around curiously.

" So this is where you lie and watch the lightnings and the moon," she said. " But it is beautiful ! Is that where you were sitting, in that chair, when you heard me call ? "

" That is where I was sitting," he acknowledged.

" Tell me what you were thinking of ? " she begged.

" Of you," he answered simply. " I looked down. You can just see the corner of the table there, and I thought what a wonderful evening we had had, and how sweet you had been to me."

Her arm had wandered round his shoulder again. It was a curiously protective little gesture of hers, faint memories of which were destined to haunt him for the rest of his life. She sat down upon the edge of the bed.

" And you, haven't you been a little kind, a little nice, a little gentle to me ? " she whispered. " You know when I first saw you, I was fed up.

You talked to me—I was terrified. Every moment I thought it would come, the one thing I tried to escape from for just a little time, something in the eyes, some little question, sometimes clumsy and brutal, sometimes subtle and wicked, but all the time I thought—' he's a man, it'll come, from his eyes or his lips, or the touch of him '—and it didn't, and I loved you for it. Each day,—Peter—I've liked you better, and I don't care—I don't care—I'm glad they locked me out."

Then for one long wonderful moment, Peter Cradd tasted something new in life—an honest kiss, a kiss of gratitude, of affection, a sweet kiss, a kiss that may have been a promise. He held her tenderly in his arms, and smoothed back her hair. When he stood away, he felt a young man—with all a young man's strength of purpose and energy.

" Child," he said, " you are wonderful. I am so happy, because you have trusted me. We aren't all beasts, you know."

" It was just at first," she faltered. " You understand, the eternal one demand—no count of personality, no count of anything else—just that one demand, and, my God, doesn't a woman grow to loathe it ! "

He stooped down and kissed her fingers, punched the pillow, showed her the candle and matches, opened the window a little wider. All the time her eyes followed him questioningly.

" You'll be all right ? " he asked.

" Yes," she answered faintly.

He poured out a glass of water, and placed it on the table by the side of the bed. Then he turned down the lamp. The moon was shining in.

" You don't want all the flying creatures in the world around," he said, as he moved towards the door.

She was still seated upon the edge of the bed, the faintest smile of interrogation upon her lips, the question lingering in her eyes. He saw it as he opened the door, and, with a farewell wave of the hand closed it behind him gently. Then he tiptoed downstairs, took his hat from the rack in the hall, passed out into the cool night air, and ran faster than he ever ran in his life.

The porter at the hotel was distinctly annoyed. He had been in a sound sleep, and to have this quiet-looking little man all dishevelled and disturbed, burst in upon him at something after midnight was scarcely the pleasantest of experiences.

" Jim," Peter Cradd exclaimed, " you know me. I was up at the bar twice to-day."

The man rubbed his eyes.

" Why, it's Mr. Cradd ! What's wrong, sir ? "

" I want a room for the night, but a drink first—a drink for you and for me, eh ? "

Jim roused himself.

" What do you want a room for ? " he demanded sleepily. " You've got a house of your own here."

" I know," Peter Cradd explained, " but I've had a visitor unexpectedly, and I've only got one bed. Let's have a drink together, Jim, and you must find me a room. You see, I've had to turn out."

Jim, mindful of previous generosity on the part of his unexpected visitor, bestirred himself willingly enough.

" Step on tiptoe," he enjoined. " Missus ain't keen on me going to the bar, though I've got the right to serve a late arrival who's going to take a room. Sit down here, Mr. Cradd," he invited, as they passed the sacred portals of the bar. " Now just you wait a moment whilst I go and get the keys, and open up your room."

Peter Cradd sat down, but very soon rose to his feet. Action of some sort, continual action, seemed a furious necessity of the moment. He tiptoed round the room, listened out of the door, looked into the shadows of the empty dining-room and lounge. Presently Jim returned.

"I've opened up a room on the first floor," he announced, handing the late arrival a key. "Number seventeen. What will it be, sir?"

"Whisky for me, I think. What for you, Jim?"

"The same, thanking 'e kindly, sir."

Peter Cradd began to drink from his tumbler before the soda water arrived. His companion stopped him in surprise.

"Steady, guv'nor," he admonished. "You ain't going to drink that neat."

"Sorry," Peter Cradd apologised. "I forgot. Not too much soda water, Jim. I want a real drink."

He drained his tumbler, and held it out. The barman refilled it, refilling his own at the same time.

"You're a bit of a sport, you are, guv'nor," he observed, with a chuckle. "When you came in this afternoon, and wanted to know all about them cocktails, and bought the bottles of champagne, I didn't think you were much at the liquor."

"Very good thing, drink," Peter Cradd mumbled.

The aching was less now, the torment in his blood was less, the fever was cooling. His brain was a little confused. The memory of that still, lavender-scented bed, the sheets turned down, the moonlight across the room, and that treacherous, insidious perfume of fresh flowers floating about like some heavenly narcotic, had passed. She would be asleep by now, the moon lying at her feet, her head upon his pillow. She would have given up listening for the footsteps that were never to

come—or should he rush back? What a fool he had been! The front door was open. He had only to steal up those stairs. . . .

"Some more whisky, quick, Jim," Peter Cradd demanded.

Peter Cradd had it, and presently Jim carried him upstairs.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER VII

At eight o'clock the next morning, Peter Cradd toyed with a little fish, was very nearly sick at the sight of his bacon and eggs, drank three cups of tea, paid his bill, and departed, red-eyed and with a headache which not even the west wind and the invigorating sunshine could altogether dispel. He stole up the path to the Old Vicarage with beating heart. The remains of the supper had disappeared. Everything was cleared away. He glanced again at his watch. It seemed incredible that Mrs. Skidmore should have arrived home so soon. Then he crept up the stairs, and when he reached the oak door he stood with his fingers upon the handle, not daring to turn it. He knocked. There was no reply. He made a discreet entrance. The room was empty. He looked around blankly. The bed had been slept in—uneasily slept in to judge by the disturbance of the bed-clothes—the water had been drunk, and against the carafe was a note. He tore it open with trembling fingers:

"DEAR SWEET MAN,—

"*I don't really believe in you—I can't believe that there could have been such a night as last night. I am going to tidy up as well as I can, and go. I*

shall ask one last service of you. Pay my bill at Mrs. Nicholls', please. I'm taking the omnibus that starts at seven from the corner here for Norwich. I shall send for my clothes some time. I do not know what you're thinking of me—too good things, I am afraid, for I'm not really good—I wish I were. If I had met men like you, I think I should have been, because part of the night I was awake, and I lay thinking, and I saw, it seemed, now and then, how happy being good might make one.

"Good-bye, my dear, dear friend,

"EILEEN."

Gone! The struggle over, without comprehension, without any definite end to all his doubts and thoughts, to all that insurgent part of him, which, mocking at his will, had swept into his mind and governed his life during those strange moments. He realised, as he stood there, looking down with a faint sensuous joy at the signs of her late presence, that for the last twenty-four hours Peter Cradd of Park Avenue, Ealing, had lain dead. Someone in his place had started life afresh, had known what was right to do, and done it. He drew back the sheets, patted the pillow, and made his way downstairs. He wandered aimlessly round the table where their little feast had been held. There, in the bush, was the crumpled ball of paper, the telegram she had thrown away. He stood looking at it for a moment. Then he took it into his hand. Had she left it there deliberately, he wondered, meaning him to read it, meaning him to understand things which she hesitated to say? Slowly he unfolded it. Then, at the last moment, an instinct of repulsion seized him. He tore it into small pieces and flung them recklessly over the hedge into the paddock.

After all, it was a day of wonders. He found Large waiting for him, full of regrets at the departure of "young missie." They groped their way out into the wider waters, and Peter Cradd went overboard to sense once more this new entrancing joy. With the plunge into the sweet, freshly flowing, salt water, all his tangled memories, the confusion of the night before, seemed to pass. He was back again in the new life with the sun upon his face, and his limbs plunging luxuriously in the cool, briny waters. Large pulled him into the boat later on with a word of encouragement.

"You be a fine swimmer, sir, for a town gentleman," he declared. "Where will you eat your bite of lunch? Over on yon island?"

Peter Cradd assented, and over to the island they went. He ate the chicken and ham and bread which she had packed for him so carefully, and lay sadly in the shade of the same hillock. More than ever, he realised that some force stronger than his own will had taken hold of him during the last few days. It was a part of the new-born man, a part of the new Peter Cradd, who lay there aching for the touch of her cool arm, the glory of her rounded limbs, the humanity of her talk. When he thought of these things, there was a great loneliness in his heart. He realised that he was never made for complete solitude, that some day or other he would have to face this new problem of life which had presented itself with almost staggering suddenness only a few hours ago. There was something inside him which had been starved for years. He felt it stirring now, as he had felt it stirring forty-eight hours before in the same spot. Why not have taken her friendliness, her sympathy, everything she had to offer? She had been ready enough to give. What quaint instinct, as yet unanalysed,

had crept from its hiding-place to foil his desires? It certainly was not the memory of his marriage vows. They had meant nothing to him but dreary shackles against which he had never had the strength or the will to struggle. It must have been born with this new liberty, akin to other strange thoughts and hopes which had come to him as he had lain sleepless these moonlit nights. No use worrying about it, he decided. Things would right themselves, and all the time the luminous joy of this new freedom was shining gloriously throughout his being. His sense of beauty, developing hour by hour, almost like the mind of a precocious child, was pointing the way all the time to a new and undiscovered world. A curious flash of recollection carried him back to the moment not long ago when his eyes had followed wistfully that ragged beam of sunshine in his dreary living-room, and he had thought of spring flowers, the crocuses and the violets in the gardens and within the reach of more fortunate men. There had always been that faint yet passionate desire for escape, even when the shackles had lain most heavily upon him. Now that it had come, he felt sometimes as he felt at that moment, almost intoxicated, in a Nirvana of content. The sun was there to warm his body, the sea to receive his limbs, sweet-smelling herbs and grasses surrounded him, everything ugly had been swept from his life. He fixed his eyes upon a little patch of blue sky overhead, listened to the singing of a lark, almost stationary above him, and in a purely unconscious effort of pantheism, some part of that deep gratitude which had been seeking expression for days and weeks passed tremblingly from his lips.

Large and he walked presently down to the beach together.

" Seems kind of quiet without little missie," the former remarked. " One of them simple, nice girls she were, it's a pleasure to be out along with. Didn't seem to have no use for young men," he went on meditatively. " There was three or four of them hanging around to give her the glad eye, but she wouldn't have it. Do you know what she told me, sir ? "

Peter Cradd shook his head.

" Told me she'd come here to get away from the men folk, wouldn't have nothing to say to them. She seemed to take a kind of fancy to you, though."

" I'm a great deal older, you see," Peter Cradd murmured, letting his fingers slip through the water.

Large considered him appraisingly.

" Yes, you be a good deal older," he conceded, " but you be a man, sir, I should judge, as has taken some care of himself. Not a drinker, sir, I should say."

" I was drunk last night," Peter Cradd confessed.

Large coughed apologetically.

" Well, sir," he observed, " we do all have our times of weakness. There come one night every year after we fishermen has our settling up for the three-months' catch, when I says to 'em all round here that him as do go home sober is but a disgrace, and we none of us do—none of us 'cept them two brothers Harris what belongs to Salvation Army," he concluded, with a chuckle, " and one of them slipped off the quay going home by way of a bit of an accident."

Large chuckled once more at the reminiscence, and then relapsed into the fisherman's silence. Lower and lower in the boat, Peter Cradd sank. He was awakened by the bumping against the quay.

" Nice bit of sleep you've had, sir," Large

remarked, as he made the boat fast. "You'll be along to-morrow?"

"I certainly shall," the other promised, as they climbed the steps together. . . .

A certain sense of loneliness oppressed him as he strolled along homewards, a loneliness which, in a way, he resented. It was absurd to miss so much a slip of a girl whom he had known for so short a time. After all, though, he realised, with a sudden flash of inspiration that it was not the girl herself whose departure had left him lonely, it was the joy of living that went with her, the lightness of thought, the gaiety, all the possibilities of life of which she was the signpost. His mind was full of these thoughts as he walked up the path to his little home and threw himself into one of the low basket chairs.

"Tea, Mrs. Skidmore," he called out. "I hope your sister's better."

"Thank you, sir, she is much better. I will bring your tea in five minutes," was the somewhat measured reply.

Peter Cradd made a little grimace. There was no doubt that he was in Mrs. Skidmore's bad books. He settled himself down to wait for his tea, but was almost at once disturbed by the noisy opening and shutting of his garden gate. His heart sank. The one thing which he had dreaded had arrived. He had a visitor. A tall, burly man, with a black beard, dressed in semi-clerical clothes, with thick, fisherman's shoes, ungloved hands, and swinging an ash stick—a *tout ensemble* which contrasted queerly with the gold cross which hung from his chain—was crossing the lawn towards him. This, of course, he realised, must be his landlord.

"I suppose you are Mr. Barnslow?" he ventured, holding out his hand tentatively.

The newcomer merely touched his hat. There

was nothing in his manner to denote that this was a visit of courtesy. He had more the air of a somewhat ferocious schoolmaster who had come to inflict chastisement upon an errant pupil.

"My name is Barnslow," he admitted. "You are my tenant here, Mr. Cradd, I believe."

"It has been very kind of you to let me have this place," Peter Cradd acknowledged. "Will you sit down, please?"

The Vicar stared at the little man confronting him for several moments, and, after some hesitation, accepted a chair.

"Mr. Cradd," he announced, "I have come on a most unpleasant errand."

Peter Cradd's blue eyes were filled with mild wonder. As yet he had not the slightest idea as to what this portentous visit might signify.

"I am sorry to hear that, sir," he faltered.

"You are a monthly tenant of mine here," the clergyman continued, "and you are paying me, I believe, ten guineas a week. The first month's rent you paid in advance. I have brought it back to you. You must cancel our agreement and leave the place as quickly as possible."

"What—go away?" Peter Cradd asked in dismay.

"Or find other quarters."

"But why?"

The Vicar tapped the flagstones with his ash stick vigorously.

"Mr. Cradd," he pointed out, "the house you are occupying—this house—is not, I am aware, of a pretentious character, but it is, after all, a vicarage. It was never intended when I let it to you that it should become—I regret to say—a centre of scandal."

Peter Cradd became very quiet.

"Will you please explain, sir," he begged.

"I am informed," the Vicar continued, toying with his watch-chain, and looking fixedly at his companion, "that a young lady slept here last night."

"That's quite right," Peter Cradd admitted, a little dazed. "There was nowhere else for her to sleep. The woman she was lodging with turned her out."

"With good reason, I have no doubt," the Vicar declared severely. "I think I need say no more, Mr. Cradd. I happen to know that there is only one bedroom furnished in the house. I shall throw myself upon your generosity, and ask you——"

"But it was because there was only one bedroom furnished in the house that I had to go to the hotel," Peter Cradd interrupted.

Mr. Barnslow leaned forward in his chair.

"What's that?" he demanded. "Do I understand you to say that you slept at the hotel last night?"

Peter Cradd fumbled in his pocket, and produced the bill.

"There you are, sir," he pointed out. "The young lady had supper with me, but left just before ten o'clock. She came back afterwards because she couldn't get into her lodgings. They had locked her out. I gave her my room, and I went up to the hotel. When I got back this morning, she had left."

Mr. Barnslow studied the bill, pulled his beard thoughtfully, and looked at his erring tenant. The latter certainly had not the air of a libertine.

"This statement of yours, sir," he conceded, "may put a different complexion upon the matter. Would you mind telling me the whole story?"

"With pleasure," was the prompt assent. "I went out sailing with the young lady the day before yesterday."

"A friend of yours?" the Vicar interrupted.

"Nothing of the sort. Just another human being enjoying the sea and the sunshine and the holiday. There was only one boat. We shared it. I took no lunch. She had a little packet of sandwiches. She insisted upon my taking half of them. On our return I invited her to supper last night."

Mr. Barnslow nodded. He wished to be favourably impressed. He liked the appearance of this strange little man, and he had not lightly made up his mind to part with that ten guineas a week.

"She arrived somewhere about half-past seven. It was not my fault that Mrs. Skidmore had gone to Norwich. You can ask her yourself, sir. She sent me a telegram to say that she could not come back, as her sister was ill. We had our supper, the young lady and I, out on the terrace where we are sitting now. At about nine o'clock a very rude youth brought her a telegram, and wanted to take her home. She preferred to follow presently. He seemed angry, and she confided to me that his attentions had been annoying her. Later on—not more than an hour later—I took her home and left her at the corner of the street. Then I came back, and was just thinking of going to bed when I heard her calling me from the garden. They had shut her out. She had hammered at the door until all the neighbours had come and complained. The woman wouldn't let her in. Most likely that lout had told her some lies. Naturally, I gave her my bed, and went up to the hotel. You know all the people round, Vicar. Go and ask the neighbours if you want to, if she didn't try to get in to her own lodgings? When she came back, what was I to

do? Leave her to sleep out-of-doors? I did just what I think you would have done yourself, sir."

The clergyman rose, and held out his hand.

"Mr. Cradd," he said, "I perceive that I owe you an apology. Your manner convinces me. I do not require to make any other enquiries."

Mrs. Skidmore appeared with the tea. She curtseyed to the Vicar, but her manner was still stiff.

"You will join me, sir?" Peter Cradd invited timidly.

"With pleasure," was the prompt reply.

To her surprise, Mrs. Skidmore was instructed to bring another cup. Mr. Barnslow noticed her manner, and summoned her back.

"Rachel Skidmore," he said, "there has been scandal concerning certain happenings in this house."

"A young woman, sir," the housekeeper remarked primly.

Mr. Barnslow tugged at his beard. Mrs. Skidmore quailed. The whole neighbourhood was afraid of its spiritual mentor at times when he indulged in such a gesture.

"The sin, Mrs. Skidmore," he declared, in a voice which might easily have reached the village, "was with the scandalmongers. Mr. Cradd is blameless. The young woman was unjustifiably turned out of her lodgings. Mr. Cradd gave her his bed and slept at the hotel. He behaved precisely as I should have behaved myself. Do you hear that, Rachel Skidmore—precisely as I should have behaved myself?"

"I do indeed, sir," the woman admitted hastily, "and glad I am to hear it."

"Then fetch that other cup and saucer and be thankful that you have a master who knows how to behave like a Christian gentleman when an

emergency arises. Hurry, Rachel Skidmore. I am thirsty."

The housekeeper made an almost precipitate exit.

"She knows the truth now, at any rate," the Vicar declared. "When I leave you I shall make a point of calling upon Mrs. Nicholls. The woman is a pig-headed, narrow-minded Salvationist. She would be better out of the parish altogether, and as she lives in one of my cottages, she won't be too pleased to hear me tell her so. As to that lout of a nephew of hers, I've a bone to pick with him on another matter. He's one of those full-blooded yokels that can't leave the women alone. Farmer Middleton will have something to say to him in a month or two."

Peter Cradd was a little dazed. His visitor was overpowering. He summoned up courage, however, to ask the fateful question.

"You won't want to turn me out then?"

"Of course not," was the hearty response. "Thank God for a good cup of tea! My second best teapot, I see. Why not the silver one, Rachel?"

"If I'd known you'd be coming, sir," the woman began——

"What does that matter?" Mr. Barnslow interrupted. "Mr. Cradd is paying a good rent. He has a right to the best of everything. Two knobs of sugar, please, and no cream. Rachel, are those tea-cakes fresh?"

"I made them this afternoon, sir," the woman assured him humbly.

"I am glad I came," the Vicar declared, with his mouth full—"very glad indeed. . . . How long were you going to stay with us, Mr. Cradd?"

"For ever, I think," was the earnest reply.

His companion smiled at him tolerantly.

"That sounds as though you liked the place, at

any rate," he observed. "What brought you here?"

Again Peter Cradd was beginning to feel that sort of desire for human sympathy and understanding which had swept over him in waves during the last few days. He studied his remarkable visitor for a moment curiously. Mr. Barnslow was built on large lines. He was well over six feet, his frame was Herculean, his skin as sunburnt as a fisherman's, and his brown eyes were clear and bright. He had laid aside his hat and disclosed a wealth of black hair streaked with grey.

"I came here by chance," Peter Cradd confessed. "It is the first holiday I have had that I could call a holiday for over thirty years. I have never been so happy in my life as for the last week. I never thought there was any place in the world so beautiful. I never thought that it could give me such pleasure, just to be alone in a country like this."

"No holiday for thirty years?" Mr. Barnslow repeated, incredulously.

"Very nearly that, sir. You see, I was married young, and I have never been very successful in life. I had a family, too, and I couldn't seem to get on. When they were young, we went to the seaside sometimes, but it was just as hard work there looking after them. I never had any time—time to think, or read, or get into the country, or do any of those things I'm doing now."

"Affairs have improved with you lately, eh?"

"I have been left a great deal of money," Peter Cradd confided. "Quite unexpectedly. I couldn't believe it at first, but it turned out to be true. As soon as I was sure, there was only one thing I wanted. I wanted the quiet, the country, the sun, and the sea. I wanted to get away from everything that I'd seen daily all through these miserable

years. I came here, and there has been no happier person in the world than I for the last fortnight."

The Vicar smiled sympathetically. With a muttered word of apology he produced and lit a pipe. His host followed suit with a cigarette.

"Sounds quite like a story," the former remarked. "What about your wife and family?"

"We haven't quite the same tastes," Peter Cradd explained hesitatingly. "I've left them plenty of money to do what they like with."

"And how are they spending it?"

"I have no idea," was the indifferent reply. "They think that I am in New Zealand."

Mr. Barnslow's genial expression changed a little.

"Is that quite fair?" he demanded. "Supposing your wife heard of your being down here, and of your adventure of last night? What about that, eh?"

"I couldn't help it if she did. It wouldn't make any difference. I've been married very nearly twenty-five years, and during all that time I have never once been unfaithful. It isn't everyone could say that, sir."

The Vicar, who had once taken a holiday at Knocke, and found it a little too near Ostende, flushed under his tan, although he consoled himself with the reflection that this was years before his own marriage. Peter Cradd continued, however, without noticing his companion's momentary confusion.

"I've never been unfaithful," he repeated, "but I am heartily tired of my wife. I should like very much never to see her again. As for my children, I'm sick of them too. I think that they all constitute the most disagreeable family anyone ever had."

SRINAGAR ACC. NO

Mr. Barnslow's jaw dropped. He was staring at this truth-telling, harmless-looking little man in blank amazement.

" But, Mr. Cradd," he protested, " you can't be serious! A woman you have lived with all these years—children of your own begetting! "

" You asked me, and I must tell you the truth, sir," was the sorrowful reply. " I've lived with my wife all these years, because I married her, and because I had to. I took the responsibility, and I've done my best to live up to it. As for my children, if I'd known how they were going to turn out, I can assure you I should never have had any. But I didn't know. One doesn't. There must be thousands of other human beings in the same position that I am, but they won't own up to it. Perhaps they have taken to drink, or gone with women, or found some pleasure to keep them from going mad. I didn't, I just went on until I sometimes think that another year would have seen me in a lunatic asylum."

" Most extraordinary! " the Vicar boomed.

" I've been earning between two hundred and fifty and four hundred a year ever since I was married," Peter Cradd continued, " and I've scarcely ever been out of debt. When I came away I hadn't had a new suit of clothes for four years, or any new shirts or underclothes. I hadn't had a meal in the middle of the day except on Sundays, and when I had the money given me to take a customer out, for at least five years. I'd given up smoking. I'd scarcely tasted a drop of beer or anything—except again when it was with a customer. Do you know what I was doing throughout all those years—the best years of my life? I was fighting day by day, week by week, month by month, to support a grumbling, careless wife, and

three improvident, complaining children. I was the drudge—just the one person who counted for nothing in the household, who simply existed for the purpose of having his pockets emptied on Saturday afternoons. I never thought I should escape. I simply hoped that the day would come when I should fall ill, and be taken away to hospital, because I knew that I should never get better if once I got the chance of dying. That was my life, Mr. Barnslow. Here I am, an escaped convict. Was it likely that I was going to bring my family with me and start another glorified martyrdom ? "

" The position was certainly difficult," the Vicar acknowledged.

" They'll find me out some day, I suppose," Peter Cradd continued mournfully. " I don't care. I shan't go back. Nothing could make me go back. Neither shall they come here. Half of all the money I have in the world is theirs. They can have all the things they want in life. All that I want is what I am getting here."

" Extraordinary ! " the Vicar repeated.

" I suppose it seems very terrible to you, sir—a man leaving his wife and family, and that sort of thing ? " Peter Cradd went on, after a few moments' pause. " I daresay I'm a little odd. If I am it's because I've had the reason pretty well hammered out of me. I've just this much of it left. I know what I want. I want to spend the rest of my life with things and people that don't depress me. I want full liberty of choice in all things. I never want to see a cinema, or belong to a tennis club, or live in a villa, or ride in an omnibus, or smell leather again. Where I am is where I would like to stay."

" Then," the Vicar remarked, with a twinkle in his eyes, " I had better do a little business whilst I'm here. The Vicarage is for sale."

"How much?" Peter Cradd asked eagerly. "With or without the furniture?"

"With the furniture—except the books," Mr. Barnslow stipulated. "I must have my books, and there are two or three pictures that belong to my people, and my fishing tackle."

"How much?" Peter Cradd repeated almost hysterically.

"There are two acres and a half of garden, including the paddock. What about four thousand pounds?"

"I'll write you a cheque," Peter Cradd declared, springing to his feet.

Mr. Barnslow laughed long and heartily. Loiterers passing along the sea walk stopped to listen.

"But, my friend," he protested, "one can't do business like that. You must have a lawyer to look into the title, and all sorts of things."

"Must I?" Peter Cradd rejoined scornfully. "If I give you a cheque for four thousand pounds and you give me a letter saying you've sold me the house and everything in it, except the books, and a few odd pictures, what business is it of anyone else's? I should like to sleep under my own roof to-night."

This time the Vicar's laugh attracted the attention even of the fishermen lounging on the quay.

"Go and get the place valued," he begged. "The back premises are in a pretty poor condition. Cost you money to put the water supply right too."

"I don't care," was the obstinate reply. "This is where I've spent the happiest days of my whole life. I don't want anything more than this. Come along and write the letter."

The Vicar rose and followed his tenant into the library.

"This is all right between us," he declared, as he

pocketed his cheque a few minutes later, " but I shall send my lawyer down to see you to-morrow."

" Send him along," Peter Cradd agreed indifferently. " I shall be out from ten to five. Any time before or afterwards. I shall be out from ten to five every day when the sun shines, or the wind blows, or the rain falls."

" But what do you do with yourself ? " Mr. Barnslow asked, more and more interested.

" When the weather's fair, I sail as soon as the tide's right," Peter Cradd explained. " When it's late, I walk down as far as I can and wait until Large can bring the boat to me. I wear these disreputable old clothes. I lie in the sunshine, and I swim. When the wind blows, I walk down the dyke to the Point. I listen to it booming on the marshes, I watch it churn up the spray from the sea. I go bareheaded, and I love the feel of it on my cheeks. When the rain falls, I get as far as the Sanctuary if I can, and turn around and watch the clouds lean over the land and the grey mists roll up the estuary. Rain's not so bad, I think—something purifying about it."

" So that's the sort of man you are," the Vicar mused. " And I came here like a blundering fool to kick you out of the place. A poet of nature—that's what my sister Louise would call you."

Peter Cradd smiled across at his visitor, and his blue eyes were full of enthusiasm.

" I don't know a thing about poetry," he acknowledged, " but if there is any more beautiful way of spending time for a man who has passed thirty years slaving in a quagmire, I should like to know what it is."

The clergyman rose and nearly broke several small bones in his late tenant's hand as he gripped it.

" I'm glad to have you for a neighbour, Mr. Cradd," he said. " I think we shall be friends."

So that night, Peter Cradd entered into his new paradise.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER VIII

NORFOLK people are seldom inclined to accept newcomers warmly, but Peter Cradd, sponsored by the Vicar, and beloved of the fishermen, was speedily adopted as an inoffensive but welcome inhabitant. Only Jim at the hotel, who had carried him up to bed, and Mrs. Skidmore, who still had doubts as to the entire propriety of that supper party, looked upon him as other than a thoroughly harmless and well-conducted, middle-aged gentleman. He became as brown as the fishermen themselves, developed a most extraordinary muscle, learned to sail a boat, and made considerable progress in the art of sea fishing. He had paid one reluctant journey to Norwich, practically dragged there by Mr. Barnslow, during which his shopping gave a great fillip to the trade of the city for the day. He ordered six suits of clothes and enough wines and spirits to fill his cellar from establishments recommended by his companion. He also bought a motor-car, two fishing rods, a cocktail shaker, and a large supply of hosiery and hats. Bereft of his last excuse now, therefore, he sat timidly one Sunday in a seat at the back of the church and listened to his new friend's thunderous discourse. He escaped, as he thought, in plenty of time to avoid introductions, but he reckoned without the Vicar, who left the vestry in his surplice, and took him by the shoulder.

" No sneaking off like that, Peter Cradd," he

boomed. " Now that I've got you, I want you to meet my sister."

Peter Cradd stood, bareheaded, and shook hands with a young woman in a white dress, who had just made her somewhat negligent approach.

" A new neighbour, I hear, Mr. Cradd," she said. " Is it true that George has really succeeded in selling you the Old Vicarage ? "

" Succeeded ? " her brother scoffed. " Couldn't keep him away from it. Take care of my sister for a minute, will you, Cradd, whilst I change my surplice and count the offertory. Shan't be long, unless you put a fiver in," he added, with a chuckle.

" You don't throw your money about to that extent, I hope, Mr. Cradd," the girl remarked. " Shall we walk down to the gate? We shall be surrounded if we don't, and one other invitation to tea this week would drive me back to London."

Peter Cradd, equally eager to escape, walked meekly by her side. They crossed the road, and he hesitated at the gates of the new Vicarage.

" You must come in for a moment," she invited. " I know that George expects it. He tells me he's asked you up dozens of times, but until he took you to Norwich by force you were always able to say you hadn't any clothes."

Peter Cradd smiled. He had suddenly discovered that, although this sister of his new friend had at first seemed formidable in her somewhat aloof elegance, she was really a very pleasant human being.

" Well," he explained, " I have been living in clothes more or less for a great many years. I've never had a holiday like this. I hated to think of stiff collars and things."

" You're quite right," she agreed. " We all go about anyhow here. You should see me when I'm

sketching on the marshes. Shall we wait here for George ? "

They sat upon two chairs underneath the cedar tree, and Peter Cradd was once more tongue-tied. He had suddenly discovered that his companion, in a strange way which he scarcely understood, was beautiful. She had dark blue eyes with silky black eyebrows, a very soft mouth, and a wonderful complexion, the delicate pallor of which, in this land of wind and sunshine, astonished him.

" As a matter of fact," she went on, " I am very fond of the Old Vicarage, Mr. Cradd. I was born there, and I suppose we should never have left only that my father found it damp in the winter. Do you suffer from rheumatism ? "

" I've never had time for illnesses," was the quiet response. " I don't think so."

" My brother tells me that you have had a very busy life," she said.

" I have had a very unpleasant one," he rejoined. " Just now I feel that I am living in paradise."

She looked at him curiously. It was strange to find anyone quite as much in earnest about anything. But then, of course, she remembered a little of his history, which her brother had told her.

" Well, I hope that you will continue to think so," she said. " I love the place, too, for a time, and I love it to come back to. George tells me that you have done wonderful things in the short time that you have been here. You have learnt to sail a boat, to row, to fish, and no end of things. But surely you did some of them when you were a boy ? "

" Not one of them," he assured her. " I left school at fifteen, and was at work before I was sixteen."

" That seems hard," she murmured. " This place is wonderful, of course," she went on,

after a moment's pause, "for anyone who loves the really open-air life. Are you going to shoot in the winter?"

"I don't know; I have never handled a gun."

"But you seem to learn things so easily. After all, you have worked so hard that you ought to give up a great deal of time to sport now—that is unless you're fond of travelling."

"I have never been out of England," he confided.

This time he had succeeded in surprising her. She looked at him with a curious uplift of her eyebrows. A strange little man, very neat in his obviously new clothes, very shy, yet with something behind the wistfulness of his blue eyes which half puzzled, half interested her.

"You see," he explained, "I have been a very unimportant commercial traveller all my life, never earning quite enough really to live on. I had some money left me just lately, and I came down here to rest."

"And you took the Old Vicarage, and then you bought it," she observed. "Well, I think you will be a very pleasant neighbour for my brother, Mr. Cradd. He seems to like you very much."

"I like him, too," Peter Cradd said diffidently, "but sometimes he frightens me."

She laughed softly.

"George frightens a good many people, although they won't own up to it," she acknowledged. "Here he is!"

George Barnslow came storming up the avenue, his coat tails flying behind him. He was bareheaded, and even the slight breeze was playing havoc with his masses of hair.

"Would you believe me," he exclaimed, "that miserable Jacob Griggs was drunk again last night?

Saturday night, mind—drunk on the quay—couldn't take his place in the choir to-day. That's why the music went flat. Drunk on the one night of the week when he ought to keep sober! Scoundrel!"

"The immediate question, my dear George," his sister reminded him calmly, "is not Jacob Griggs's iniquities, but whether we are going to persuade Mr. Cradd to try one of our home-made cocktails before he departs."

"Cocktails be hanged!" the Vicar snorted. "I hate the vile things. You'll stay to lunch, Cradd, and I'll give you a glass of Amontillado sherry first."

Peter Cradd was seized with a sudden terror. He sought wildly for excuses, but he suddenly felt a gentle hand upon his coat sleeve.

"Do stay, Mr. Cradd. George is in one of his moods, you see. He'll insist upon carving himself, and splashing the gravy all over the tablecloth, and making himself an awful nuisance. Please, and I'll drive you back home afterwards in my two-seater."

"That's no treat," her brother grunted. "Rode in it myself yesterday, and felt I hadn't a whole bone in my body afterwards."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Cradd will stay. You see, he's not quite so large as you, George."

And Peter Cradd did stay. He ate a simple luncheon, very pleasantly served, and was waited upon, to his intense discomfort, by a manservant. It happened that Barnslow really was disturbed that morning. Little things had gone wrong with the service. The offertory, except for Peter Cradd's contribution, had not come up to expectations. There were serious rumours as to the nature of Farmer Middleton's youngest daughter's illness,

and Mrs. Nicholls's nephew was reported to be on his way to Canada. In her lazy fashion, however, his sister smoothed everything down. Without her hat, she was even better-looking, more unapproachable than before. He marvelled at the gloss upon her dark hair, her elaborately manicured nails, the seductiveness of her Paquin gown. It was true that her figure was perhaps a little over-slim, and there was a note of irony sometimes in her remarks which he was swift to notice. Otherwise, she was a very gracious and charming presence. She took Peter Cradd out on to the terrace afterwards for coffee, whilst his host went in search of cigars.

"I think I am going to agree with my brother, Mr. Cradd," she said. "I am going to like you. You are unusual. Do you think you could possibly like me?"

"I am quite sure that I could," he answered, with a simple fervour which delighted her. "Especially——"

"Well?"

She had a momentary glimpse of those blue eyes fixed anxiously upon her. She smiled encouragingly.

"—Especially if you promise not to be too clever, and remember that I am ignorant of all those things which you and your brother take as a matter of course, and that I am rather clumsy at conversation."

"I couldn't be clever if I tried," she assured him. "Some of my friends in the studio where I go to work occasionally think that I am a perfect fool. . . . They tell me that you have hired Large's boat until your new one comes along. Will you take me down to Seagull's Island to-morrow? I began a sketch there last year. If the colouring is at all right I should like to go on with it."

"I will take you with pleasure," he assented. "You'll have to leave, though, at a quarter to ten, or before. After that the tide will have turned."

She indulged in the faintest of grimaces.

"Our lives here are governed by the tides," she complained, "but I will be on the quay. George," she went on, turning her head as her brother appeared, "I win my bet. Mr. Cradd is going to take me to Seagull's Island to-morrow morning."

"I bet her a box of chocolates you'd get out of it somehow," her brother chuckled. "You're being over-polite, Cradd. You needn't. She can be amiable when she likes, but she's a worthless hussy, and no one in this world can see what she's aiming at when she settles down to work."

"Don't abuse me unduly, George," she begged, calmly lighting a cigarette. "Mr. Cradd is disposed to like me, if you let him alone. Besides, I believe he is rather by way of being an artist himself. He will probably understand where you wouldn't."

"I could never be an artist," Cradd confessed. "I like all the simple things."

Barnslow roared with laughter.

"Got you first time, Louise!" he exclaimed. "Put that in your pipe and smoke it, my girl. Cradd'll never have much to say to your green skies and pink landscapes."

"There's no doubt whatever," Louise declared, "that something or other has put my brother in a shocking bad temper. I am glad that I have promised to drive you home, Mr. Cradd. I shall probably start earlier and take you round by Cley. In fact I think I'll fetch the car at once," she added, rising to her feet.

"Risk his neck if you do," her brother muttered. "You take my tip, Cradd. You go straight home.

She's brought down here, to a perfectly respectable household, a thing she calls a "sports" car—looks like a red torpedo gone wrong. Have a cigar?"

"Never smoke them, thanks."

"Well, I can't on a Sunday," Barnslow grunted. "Sunday school in quarter of an hour. Children's Service afterwards. What a day! Come to Sunday school, Cradd."

"Not on your life!" was the prompt reply. "I mean, thank you very much, but I should dislike it extremely."

The Vicar frowned down upon him.

"You and I will have to have a talk one day," he warned him. "I am not at all sure that you have what I should call proper religious impulses, Cradd. You've got to have 'em if you live here. There's the Salvation Army whooping at one end of the quay, and I'm waiting for you at the other. No slipshodding!"

"I'm thankful," Peter Cradd declared, "that I am beginning to know you a little better, Mr. Barnslow. You used to frighten me terribly."

"Well, you're a better man than you were for it," Barnslow remarked, lighting a cigarette, and making a wry face at the sound of the bells. "No stray young ladies to supper at the Old Vicarage nowadays, eh? That's my influence."

There was a shrieking of brakes, a flying of pebbles, and a long red object, not unlike Barnslow's description of it, came tearing round the bend of the avenue. Peter Cradd, obeying her invitation, stepped into the small hole by Louise's side.

"I don't think I'll take you for a drive," she decided. "On Sunday there are so many people. The roads are dusty, everybody hates you, and I am always afraid of running into one of these loony couples in the village who wander about with their

arms round one another. Are you alone this afternoon ? "

"Absolutely," he replied. "I always am. Why?"

" Oh, I don't know, I heard you sometimes had tea parties, or supper parties or something. If you are all alone, I should like to come and bring some books away. You know the books don't belong to you, don't you, Mr. Cradd ? "

" Of course I do," he acquiesced. " I'll send them all up any day you say."

" Please don't," she begged. " We would like to get them back a few at a time. To-day I will bring away some of my favourites. Are you ready ? "

" Quite," said Peter Cradd, clenching his teeth, and gripping on to the side of the car.

" Off we go then ! "

For the next few minutes he had a vivid sensation of flying houses, pebbles hitting the mudguards like revolver shots, and angry pedestrians dispersing like rabbits. At the end of his brief experience, he found himself at his own gate.

" Scared ? " she asked, as she prepared to descend.

" Not in the least," he assured her. " I hadn't time."

" A trifle Jesuitical ? " she laughed. " Never mind. You fit into my car a great deal better than George, and you're not so rude about it."

She crossed the lawn with him, entered the library, and threw herself on to his comfortable lounge.

" Give me a cushion, please," she begged. " You'll find one there by the chiffonier. And have you any cigarettes ? "

" Only gaspers," he admitted.

She sighed, but accepted the packet he handed her, and lit one.

"We're all coming to them," she said. "A vitiated taste all the same. Now bring that chair up, and talk to me. I have to stay down here a fortnight, and I have a nervous dread of being bored."

"I'm afraid that I shall not be much use to you," he regretted. "I'm not accustomed to talking to ladies, and I have nothing to talk about, anyway."

"Conversation is the one thing which can be manufactured out of nothing," she reminded him. "George has told me all about you. What I've heard I like, except of course I should prefer you not married. Still, I think it is awfully plucky of you to push off, and try to get something out of life by yourself."

"Most people," he remarked, "would think it egregiously selfish."

"I differ. Who was the girl you had here, Mr. Cradd, who caused all that scandal?"

"I scarcely knew her," he answered eagerly. "I just met her down here through going out together in Large's boat. She was a City girl, having a holiday. There was nothing to make a scandal about."

"I heard the whole story," she confided. "A young man up in the village got jealous, and made his aunt shut her out. She came back here, and you did the Don Quixote and slept at the hotel. Did you really do that, or was it a pose?"

"I—I slept at the hotel certainly," he assured her, a brick-red blush asserting itself even under his coating of tan.

She looked at him meditatively. What was he really—a child or a man, or a creature of some new species? She had been on the point of saying that she would have thought none the worse of

him had the story been true. Now, for no reason that she could conceive, she was thankful that she had said nothing of the sort.

"I live in a world of cynics," she confessed. "None of us would own to believing in a really unselfish action, but then I don't suppose we any of us possess a sense of what are called the higher moralities. What are you going to do with your life, Mr. Cradd?"

"My life?" he repeated, a little vaguely. "I haven't such a lot of it left."

"Forty-six years old," she reflected. "You have the fourteen best years of a man's life."

"I don't want to do anything else except live down here," he said emphatically. "I dread the idea of any sort of a change. I am perfectly and entirely happy."

"That's all very well, but it won't last," she predicted. "You're like every other man, I suppose, *au fond*. You'll want a companion, and then there'll be trouble."

She stretched out her hand lazily for another cigarette. He hastened to help her, and their fingers touched for a moment. He mumbled apologetically, and she laughed at him.

"You're a very shy person, Mr. Cradd," she said. "I think this City young lady must have worked very hard."

"I don't think she did," he remarked simply. "I think she was just natural."

Louise sighed.

"George said you would put me in my place," she murmured, lighting her cigarette.

He was beginning to feel more at his ease, and he looked at her curiously as she changed her position in the chair. After all, however different women were, they had common characteristics, he reflected.

There was the same expanse of silken-clad leg as Eileen had displayed, undisguised, amounting almost to effrontery, the same underlying provocativeness of manner and speech, only in the case of his present companion less obvious, mingled perhaps with some faint quality of gentle condescension. Then, unlike her humbler rival, she used no cosmetics—indeed she needed none, for the scarlet of her lips he knew quite well was natural enough. The one thing she shared with Eileen, although she displayed it more subtly, was the woman's spirit of allurement. Were they all like that in these days, he wondered? If so, the world must be a very difficult place for men. Suddenly she broke in upon his reflections, surprised his absorbed gaze, and swung round towards him.

"Now, my friend," she said, "if you would preserve your character for truthfulness, tell me exactly what you were thinking about."

Peter Cradd was covered with confusion. He indulged in feeble compromise.

"I was thinking how nice you look lying there," he confessed.

"Admiring my legs, I suppose," she observed, without any attempt at movement. "Well, you'll probably see more of them if we go sailing tomorrow. Now, I was thinking of you, Mr. Cradd, and I wasn't thinking of your legs, or of your nice blue eyes, or your sunburnt skin. I was thinking about your mind. Doesn't that sound educational?"

"It does rather," he admitted. "What about my mind, please?"

"This is all George," she warned him. "He's talked about you so much that I really thought I should hate you. I don't, of course. It doesn't always turn out that way. According to him,

though, you're a sort of Man Friday, with a virgin intelligence and a virgin sensibility. Is George trying to educate you, Mr. Cradd ? "

" I suppose he is in a way," was the hesitating assent. " He doesn't say much, but he often drops little hints."

" George is a dear, but he is so clumsy," his sister sighed. " Now I should be a much better temporal mentor, at any rate."

" Please begin," he begged.

She turned a little towards him. It really was not quite fair upon Peter Cradd, because, even in her own extremely critical circle, Louise Barnslow was considered a very alluring and beautiful young woman.

" First of all," she advised, " I should give up having little City typists to supper—not as a matter of morality, mind, but purely as a matter of taste. If you must have someone to supper, why not me ? "

She laughed softly to herself, which was a wicked thing to do, for already in those innocent-looking blue eyes was a gleam of that adoration which she commanded so easily.

" I should never dare invite you," he acknowledged, " but I promise to have no one else."

" So little courage, Mr. Peter Cradd ? " she mocked.

" Why do you try to make fun of me ? " he asked.

Something in his tone—was it a quiet note of dignity, she wondered ?—came to her like a reproof. She changed her tone.

" Don't be so sure that I am making fun of you," she said pleasantly. " I always love it down here. It seems like home. But, to continue—the time you feel disposed to give to frivolity, I should give to reading."

" Tell me what to read ? " he begged.

"A responsibility, my dear Man Friday," she sighed. "I am to form your mind, eh? Well, I think I could. What have you read?"

"Nothing in the world," he confessed frankly. "The *Weekly Dispatch* on Sundays, and the *Daily Express* on weekdays."

"I should start with Wells, Carlyle, Walter Pater, and Conrad, in prose," she advised, "and Swinburne, Matthew Arnold, and Keats in poetry. Don't read as a task; have the books lying about, and pick one up when you feel like it. Don't buy a single magazine, and don't read a single novel—just yet."

He handed her a pencil and paper.

"Write down those names, please," he begged.

She wrote slowly, and with fine Italian characters.

"You'll probably find everything here," she told him. "George was always fussy about his books, so I expect it will be weeks before he sends for them. Well, that brings you to the autumn," she continued. "Then George will try to induce you to take a shoot for his sake—he's a selfish old dear—but don't you do it. This place isn't fit for a human soul in winter. Your body will be perfectly fit by that time, and your mind fertilised. Go abroad somewhere. Go to Florence. I'll give you a list of pictures to see. Perhaps I may be there myself. Pay a visit to Rome, of course, whilst you're in Italy, but don't expect too much from it. It isn't as intimate as Florence, and you haven't any Italian history. Whatever you do, don't go near the French Riviera. You have the makings of a nice, serious character about you, Mr. Cradd, with plenty of the right emotions and outlets. I don't think you'd ever be a good frivoller."

"Too late in life," he observed.

"I don't know," she replied. "I'm twenty-eight, which is about the same age for a woman as yours for a man, and I can frivol sometimes. I'm generally sorry for it afterwards," she added. "The trouble about having some pretensions to being an artist is that you get mixed up with a strange crowd—free lovers, free thinkers, free livers. They'd drag the nails out of everything if they could. Wouldn't I adore to take George to one of their parties—George in one of his most blustering moods. I can see him laying about him like a prophet of old."

"Why do you go yourself if you don't like them?" he asked, stirred to a vague jealousy.

"Why does anyone ever do anything?" she rejoined wearily. "I do it to escape from boredom—and generally fail. I wish I could adopt you, Peter Cradd. The laws of this country aren't fashioned for people like you and me. I would take the greatest possible interest in your education if I had you all to myself."

"Well, you have a fortnight," he reminded her.

"Yes," she agreed, "perhaps before that time, though, I may discover that George's hero worship is false, and that there are sophistries in the virgin brain of his Man Friday."

"You are making fun of me," he complained.

"That must be because I am getting sleepy," she confessed. "Do you know this is the sofa I used to go to sleep on every Sunday afternoon before we moved up the hill."

"You can go to sleep now if you would care to," he suggested.

She curled herself up into a more comfortable position.

"I think I will," she murmured. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not."

"We will have our tea at four o'clock," she decreed. "You can sit outside, or here quite close to me, if you like, and read Swinburne. You will find him on the third shelf there. What a nice creature you are, Peter Cradd!"

He took down a volume of Swinburne from the book-case, and, after a moment's wistful hesitation, strolled outside. Before settling down to read, he glanced furtively back into the room. She was lying with her arms thrown wide, her head buried amongst the cushions, her whole poise one of weariness, of graceful, sinuous fatigue. He abandoned the idea of the chair just on the other side of the window, took his volume of Swinburne under his arm, and departed for the walled garden.

CHAPTER IX

AGAIN Peter Cradd found himself living in a semi-subconscious state, as though his mind lacked the nimbleness to adapt itself to this new experience in his simple life. Through the long, sunny morning, too, he was haunted by a vague sense of infidelity, illogical but not the less disturbing. There was little in this expedition reminiscent of that other. Servants had brought cushions, a sketching paraphernalia, rugs, and a luncheon basket to the boat. Louise arranged herself in luxury, stretched herself out, with a little exclamation of blissful content, and motioned him to take his place by her side. The wind was slight. They drifted languidly down the ever-widening channel, and she seemed quite content with the scanty fragments of conversation which were all that passed between them. Once she leaned over, caught his arm, and pointed to a

stretch of wild lavender, a colourful smudge on the deep brown of a strip of marshland which reached, spear-like, down to one of the shimmering inlets from the sea.

"Tell me, Peter Cradd," she asked, "what colour should you paint that now?"

He considered the question for a moment.

"Kind of mauve, I should imagine, with silver behind, and brown."

She smiled.

"I suppose you would," was all she said.

Presently she sat up to light a cigarette.

"You are sure you don't mind going at once to Seagull's Island?" she asked. "I have an urge on me to work. You can bathe before we have lunch."

"Just what I was planning," he agreed.

They reached the great basin, as large as a moderate-sized lake, and with a fair wind ran into the little pool.

"I don't quite see how you'll land without wetting your feet," he remarked, a little dubiously, "unless you let Large carry you."

She laughed quietly.

"You forget that I was born here," she reminded him.

She held out her shoes for him to untie the strings. Perfectly unembarrassed, she took them off, with her stockings, and, holding her skirt tightly around her, and steadied by his hand, stepped gracefully overboard. Large followed with the easel. She walked straight to the point she had selected and stood there for several moments, looking around.

"It's almost the same colouring," she declared with satisfaction.

"But you are looking nowhere," he remarked, "neither to the sea nor to the land."

She smiled.

" How clever of you to notice that ! If I were to christen my painting anything—which I shan't —I should call it ' Nowhere.' Give me a shout at one o'clock. I may forget."

He wandered away to a distant hillock, avoiding the one where he had sat before, undressed behind it, and plunged into the sea. In half an hour's time he returned, and, lighting a pipe, lay down, glistening with the soft water, upon a bank of wild thyme, his feet in the warm sands, and his head upon a cushion of grass. John Large came over and stood by his side.

" Kind of a one for the ladies you be seemingly, Mr. Cradd," he observed conversationally.

" Well, I've never thought so," was the somewhat blank reply. " I've never known any."

" There was little missie," the fisherman went on meditatively. " She were a rare nice little thing, and then there's her leddyship here. She's different, of course. She be quality. I've known her since she were a slip of a child. She can sail a boat now, if she would, as well as any, and she used to swim like a fish. Got sort of taken up with London ways the last few years. She seems to have dropped into a fashion now of looking around as though she were seeking for summat she never saw. It's the artist of it, I suppose."

" Perhaps so," Peter Cradd assented. " I should think she was very clever."

" They do say so," Mr. Large admitted, " but I'm not sure it's much for any one to be. She don't look happy like—nothing like as happy as little missie some of those days. I do like she. Kept one lively and cheerful, she did."

Peter Cradd nodded. Just at that moment, a curious thought had obsessed him. The place in

front of her easel had been vacant as he had scrambled up the sands. Swam like a fish, did she? He wondered whether she had climbed down on the other side and were swimming there. He almost fancied he could see that long white body cleaving its way through the water, her head a little on one side, those deep blue eyes upturned to the blue of the sky. Then he was suddenly ashamed of the thought, ashamed of his daring. He dug his heel into the sand, and frowned.

"What's wrong, Mr. Cradd?" the boatman asked.

"Nothing at all; I was angry with myself, Large."

"We be all that sometimes. We was talking of her leddyship—we always call her 'Her Leddyship' here, and shall do, I reckon, all our days. She's always affable enough, but she's got that quality manner of sort of smiling down at you, however kindly she speaks. These people round here, too," he went on, waving his hand vaguely inland—"there's the Earl and his lady over at Cariswood, and all that lot—they thinks a great deal of her, sending over for her all the time they are, and there's Sir Arthur over at the Abbey. They do say that he's spoke for her many a time, but she keeps putting him off."

Peter Cradd opened his eyes, and looked up lazily at his companion. It seemed to him that there was something purposeful about this talk.

"We do see a good deal of life in our way, we quiet folk, as don't seem much," Large continued, "and we has our opinions as other people, and looking round I've always said as quality mates best with quality, and the others with their own kind. Now you and me is different, sir—I ain't no Socialist, and I know it—and you and her leddy-

ship is a bit different. For instance, now, I wouldn't dream of sitting down here unless you asked me the question."

"Sit down, Large," Peter Cradd invited.

The man accepted the invitation and arranged himself comfortably.

"As I was saying, sir," he went on, "there's them differences. You're kindly to me, and you invites me to sit down by your side, and here we are free and comfortable like. But we ain't the same class—I knows that—and, begging your pardon, sir—you and her leddyship—she's as pleasant and nice with you as she can be—but you ain't the same class. Ain't that so?"

"It certainly is," Peter Cradd admitted, with a little smile at the corners of his lips. "You'd say so even more convincingly if you knew all about me, Large."

"What I knows about you," the latter said firmly, "is that you're a pleasant-spoken, nice, kindly hearted man, and you've got a way with you as is different from the ways of us rough ones, even if it isn't exactly the ways of the quality. Now little missie—little missie's the same as you, sir—little missie, I've seen her look at you sometimes, and I've said to myself, 'What's it matter if he's a bit on the elderly side? There's a couple who loves the same things.' To see you two swimming in the water was wonderful. To see you lying there when you came out, like a couple of porpoises drying in the sunshine—that were wonderful, too. There ain't no chance of little missie coming down again, sir?"

"I'm afraid not," Peter Cradd replied. "You see, she's like I was before I had a stroke of luck—she's a worker."

"Seems a pity," Mr. Large remarked, looking

hard at his pipe, " that some gentleman as has got money don't marry her. My, she'd be a happy young woman down here."

" Who wouldn't be ? " Peter Cradd agreed.

Ben Large scratched his chin thoughtfully. He decided that he had very tactfully got rid of all the thoughts which had framed themselves in his mind during the sail out from Blakeney, and he scrambled to his feet.

" I'll go and see if her leddyship is needing me," he said, " and afterwards I'll put the lunch at the back of this hillock. You'll not mind the sun, perhaps ; there be a little wind the other way."

Peter Cradd nodded lazily. He turned his head, and watched Large disappear. Then he closed his eyes again. How right the man was ! Little missie, as he called her, was of course the proper companion for him, and in his heart there was an infinite tenderness for her. He even felt that swift thrill which had almost frightened him, which had gone quivering through his body when her bare wet arm had rested for a moment against his. If he could have allowed himself the luxury, he would willingly have lain there, he felt, in the warmth of the sun, the taste of salt upon his lips, and the joy of it upon his body, and given himself up to thoughts of little missie. Pagan—pagan thoughts, but with a spice of some new pleasure as they wove themselves in his brain. Yet against them there was always the reaction, the feeling of something missing, of something which had sounded in his heart like the song of triumph when he had drunk that last glass of whisky and been carried mumbling to bed. It wasn't like that one attained the desire of life. Not that he would ever commence to search for it now. His was just an aftermath—forty-six to sixty—but at least he might learn to understand.

He had lived so long in ignorance. He had some of the sensations of a man who had spent the greater part of his life in prison, suddenly freed, wandering about, somewhat dazed, amongst surroundings of which he knew so little. This scornful, kindly young woman, living in an infinitely remote world, with her introspective blue eyes, and her curious sense of innate achievement—how was he able to analyse or account for the turmoil of unrest with which she filled him? "Little Missie" had brought pleasure into his wakening life, but it had been a pleasure of the superficial things only. "Her Leddyship" represented mystery, an allure, the purport of which was as strange and unknown as the perfume of an exotic flower from some tropical country. In an uncertain sort of way he felt that he was groping towards a further and a deeper understanding of life in this struggle with the chaos of his thoughts, the dimly formed comparisons his subconscious self sought to create between these two women.

He sprang to his feet in obedience to her call, and she watched him approach with a smile. He was a quaint little object in his mackintosh and bathing clothes, with his curiously clear eyes, his healthy skin, his tremulous, sensitive mouth. His hair, of which he still had plenty, blew in confusion about his head.

"I say, may I lunch like this?" he asked.

"Of course," she acquiesced. "Don't you see I'm only half dressed myself."

She was without shoes and stockings, and her hair was in disorder. The caress of the sea seemed to be lingering about her.

"You've been bathing!" he exclaimed.

She laughed.

"Wasn't it wrong of me when I came out to

work! But I couldn't help it. I saw you plunge in, and it was too much for me."

" And the work ? "

She shrugged her shoulders.

" I've done some. One never knows. In a moment of optimism I might, perhaps, think it was good. I shall work for another hour and a half this afternoon, if you don't mind, whilst you lie here and sleep."

" I don't think I shall sleep," he confided. " I may have another swim, if I don't eat too much. I shall probably lie here and think."

A gleam of interest crept into her eyes.

" I wonder what it is you think about so much ? I have watched you once or twice just looking and looking up at the sky. I know you are thinking, because there is that furrow on your forehead. What about ? Your past life ? Your future one ? Or are you just being lazy ? "

" I think," he told her, a little nervously, " that quite unconsciously I am trying to build up a life. Nothing that has happened behind me, nothing in all these forty-six years, is of any help to me now, because everything has been ugly, unpleasant, and savouring of misery."

" So practically," she murmured, " you are in your first year."

" Precisely. I am groping about in the nursery. That is why I am so grateful to anyone who teaches me anything. I know no more about art than Large, no more about books than Mrs. Skidmore, my housekeeper, and very little indeed about life."

" How much do you know about women, Mr. Cradd ? "

" Your own discernment should have told you that I know nothing whatever about them," he confessed. " I lived for twenty-five years with

one. I suppose I was the usual sort of person when I married her at twenty. For the last fifteen years, I have disliked her intensely. She not only continued to lose every attraction of which she had ever been possessed, but she did so as a matter of course, without making the slightest effort to retain them, and yet——"

"And yet what?"

"Yet I have been faithful to her from the day of our marriage until now," Peter Cradd confided. "It seemed to surprise your brother when I told him that."

"It would," she answered, looking at him earnestly. "Is that the truth, Mr. Cradd?"

"The absolute truth," he assured her. "I was such a harnessed beast that I was never able to look this side or that from the track along which I dragged my burden, and it was all the time uphill. What would seem worse to you, perhaps," he went on, "is that I never saw a picture or read a book or watched a sunset. I lived without a single beautiful thing in life. That is, perhaps, why I am a little over-eager now," he concluded.

She was silent for several moments, lying on her side, and pulling the long grasses from the sand. Suddenly she sat up and drew the luncheon basket towards her.

"Did you bring anything to drink?" she asked.

"Cocktails in a thermos!" he announced, springing to his feet. "And some white wine for afterwards. What a forgetful idiot I am!"

"On the contrary, you are an angel!" she exclaimed, as she drank from the glass he offered her. "Cold, too! I daresay you have already discovered how greedy I am. I love the things I'm used to, and get so cross if I don't have them. A sign of age, I suppose, or, as George would say, of

a coming sedateness. Well, I drink to your discoveries, Peter Cradd, and may you soon open the door and the window of your nursery, and feel your wings."

He was thoughtful for a moment.

" I wonder if I shall be happier," he mused.

" I should think not," she told him. " You are too sensitive, I am afraid, to wander so far. You will probably be amongst those who prove the truth of one of the world's great platitudes—the more knowledge you acquire, the more unhappiness."

He smiled confidently.

" I haven't brain enough to acquire as much knowledge as that," he declared. " I am perfectly content here. I can sail a boat now. I love the sea, I love my little house. I love the books I am going to read. I love the peace of it all. I am happy."

She opened the luncheon basket, and spread out the contents.

" I hope," she said, " that you will be able to tell me the same thing in six months' time."

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER X

TRAGEDY—even though it were serio-comic tragedy—waited upon their return. There they were, all lined up upon the quay, the distasteful ghosts of his abjured past! Mrs. Cradd, her hair bobbed, her skirts an ultra-modish length, her clothes as unbecoming as a semi-fashionable dressmaker could make them. Lena, in a rose-coloured sweater, a pull-on hat, and a white serge skirt which just covered her knees, redolent of cosmetics, smoking a cigarette, lounging upon one of the buttresses. George in the vicious-coloured blazer

of the Ealing Road Tennis Club, a pair of tweed knickerbockers and brogue shoes. Henry in a quasi-nautical costume of white flannel trousers, blue serge coat, double-breasted, with enormous brass buttons. Flanking the group, was Mr. Bloxom, stout and red-faced, wearing a grey bowler hat, a check suit and smoking a cigar. In the background stood a large yellow motor-car . . . Peter Cradd stared at them as he manœuvred the boat across that last thirty yards of water. Louise, who was sitting up by his side, laughed softly.

" Is this anything to do with a cinema show ? " she murmured. " Or is Yarmouth deporting its undesirables ? "

" So far as I can see at present," Peter Cradd announced, swinging the tiller, " the little party you see assembled there consists of my wife, my daughter, my two sons and a gentleman who follows the profession of bookmaking and is an intimate friend of the household. They are apparently waiting for me."

She looked at him at first incredulously, then suddenly realised that he was speaking the truth. She noticed the slight quivering of his sensitive mouth, and the pathos of the situation swept in upon her. She rested her hand upon his arm.

" Poor Peter Cradd ! " she sympathised. " I'm so sorry. Will they fall on me, by the way ? "

" I don't think so," he assured her, " because, failing any other protector, I see your brother in the background."

" What are you going to do ? " she asked softly.

" Parley," he confided. " And my first condition will be that they are out of the place in an hour."

" You can't do that ! "

"Can't I?" he muttered, with a certain grimness, of which Mr. Cradd of Park Avenue, Ealing, had known nothing.

He brought the boat to. Large scrambled out, and made her fast. Peter Cradd stepped on to the quay, and gave his hand to his companion. All this time he kept his back to the little group.

"Thanks so much," Louise said, as she released his fingers. "I'll be off with George. We'll hear all your news later."

She swung away, and the little group, one and all, forgot their erring relative, and turned to watch her. She had all the qualities of looks and movement which had inspired Large's pseudonym. The fishermen standing around touched their hats as she strolled towards her brother; two women passing curtseyed, Peter Cradd waved his hand to the Vicar, and turned towards his family.

"Well, you're a nice one!" was his wife's greeting.

"What a funny sight you are, dad!" Lena cried, bursting out laughing.

"You don't mean to say you go about all the time like that!" George exclaimed.

Peter Cradd sat on a boulder, and put on his shoes, which Large had handed out of the boat. He also shook out his bathing clothes and hung them over his arm. Then he turned to face the music.

"Well," he demanded, "since you've discovered me, what have you got to say, all of you?"

"What've we got to say?" Mrs. Cradd gasped. "Pretty sort of New Zealand this is, isn't it?"

"You'd better come along to my little house," her husband invited, without change of countenance. "How are you, Bloxom?" he added.

Mr. Bloxom withdrew the hand which he had half tendered.

" Pretty fit, thanks. Been sailing, eh ? "

Peter Cradd nodded and marshalled his party.

" If you will come this way," he invited, " I shall be glad to take you somewhere where we can talk. Is that your car ? "

" It is," his wife declared truculently. " Have you anything to say about it ? I expect you've got a much finer one—you and the young woman."

" The young lady," Peter Cradd insisted, " must be kept out of the conversation, or there will be no conversation. Understand that."

" God bless my soul ! " Mrs. Cradd exclaimed. " Looked at us as though we were something out of the Zoo, too ! "

Her husband, with an effort, spared himself a retort. He walked in the middle of his family, with Mr. Bloxom slightly behind.

" Now listen, please, all of you," he began. " I've taken this little house here, and I've been very happy, and I don't want anything in the nature of a dispute with any one of you. There's no occasion for it, but understand me clearly, please. I have been the slave of the household for twenty years ; I am now my own master. There is no need for us to quarrel. You have had nothing to complain of, have you ? "

" I don't know as we have," Mrs. Cradd conceded grudgingly. " All the same——"

" Oh come on, ma," Lena interrupted. " Don't get bad tempered. Dad'll tell us presently why he did it. Is it all right about the money ? That's what we want to know."

" Is it going on ? " Henry demanded.

" Is there anything settled about it ? " George enquired eagerly.

Peter Cradd pushed open the low gate leading into the Vicarage garden, led the way across the

lawn, threw open the front door, and called for Mrs. Skidmore.

" My rooms are small," he explained. " I expect that you will find it pleasanter out here on the terrace. Mrs. Skidmore," he went on, " would you bring tea for everybody, please, and a few more chairs? That's right."

It was perhaps significant of his altered demeanour that Peter Cradd selected for himself the most comfortable chair in the middle of the little group.

" Do you want to hear all about it now, or will you wait ? " he asked.

" You'd better get on with it, and quickly," Mrs. Cradd enjoined. " What do you mean by being here when you said you were going to New Zealand ? "

" I deceived you," was the calm reply. " I have deceived you all the time. I will give you something to think about to start with. My cousin is dead. He has left me all his money. I instructed my lawyer to make you a very generous allowance until the affairs of the estate were settled up, and I trust that he has done so."

" Dead ! " Mrs. Cradd exclaimed with obvious satisfaction. " How much did he leave, Peter ? "

" How much is it, guv'nor ? " George demanded.

" If you had asked me that question yesterday," his father answered, " I could not have told you. This morning I received a fairly correct summary of the estate so far as it has been realised. Wait here for a moment, and you shall see the lawyer's figures."

He disappeared through the open French windows, and returned with a couple of sheets of parchment in his hand. During his brief absence, there had been a medley of mumbled whispers.

"The estate appears to have realised even better than the lawyer gave me to understand," he went on. "There are still a few little things to come in, but at the lowest estimate I imagine that the fortune left to me by my cousin will amount to almost three hundred thousand pounds. Anyone who wishes may examine the figures," he concluded, laying the sheets upon the table.

There was an awed silence, then a chorus of exclamations. Mr. Bloxom held out his hand once more.

"Don't know you very well, Mr. Cradd," he said, "but I'd like to congratulate you."

Peter Cradd again skilfully avoided seeing the hand, but thanked his late neighbour. Just at that moment, Mrs. Skidmore brought out the tea tray.

"Three hundred thousand pounds," Mrs. Cradd murmured to herself. "And three months ago Padstowe nearly courted us for six quid."

"I was much worse up against it than that," Henry acknowledged.

"I nearly cried once when I had a ten-shilling tip," Lena confessed. "If I hadn't been in the nasty middle cubicle I should have thrown my arms round the neck of the man who gave it to me."

"If you will make yourselves as comfortable as possible," Peter Cradd invited, wielding the tea-pot, "I will give you some tea."

"I'll do that, Peter," his wife volunteered, drawing off her very tight gloves.

"Thank you," he declined. "This is my own little sanctum, and I like to be my own host. I've had tea thrown at me for a good many years, you see," he went on, carefully pouring it out. "Now I'm going to make my own, very likely keep the

best of the cream back, and if there's any shortage of sugar, it won't be I who'll go without."

Mrs. Cradd gasped.

"Talks as though he'd been starved!" she exclaimed.

"I very nearly was," was the affable rejoinder. "You remember that scrag end of mutton the last meal we had together?"

"Scrag end of mutton?" his wife repeated. "What about it?"

"Well, I didn't get any, that's all," he reminded her. "I'm looking after myself now. I don't know whether you've noticed it, but I've gained exactly a stone since I came here."

"You're a queer-looking object," Mrs. Cradd scoffed, glancing at his shorts and fisherman's jersey.

"Look here," Lena intervened, "it's all very well being angry with dad, but it's no good telling lies about it. I never saw him look so well in my life. I've got dozens of clients who'd give me anything if I could tell them how to get as brown as that."

"Might wear a few more decent clothes," George ventured.

"You don't need clothes for the life I lead," his father assured them. "You're in the sea half the time, and sailing the rest."

"Who's the hussy?" his wife demanded.

"The lady who went out with me this afternoon," was the cold reply, "is the sister of the clergyman here, and an artist."

"Goes out with you every day, eh?"

"This happens to be the first time, but I sincerely hope it will not be the last. Pass the cream to your mother, George, and send the sugar along. I can only offer you bread and butter and jam, but there's

plenty of that. I didn't exactly know of the pleasure in store for me."

"Turned sarcastic!" his better half sniffed.

"If it wouldn't be a liberty, sir," Mr. Bloxom confided, "I'm no tea drinker. A drop of whisky and soda would go to the spot just now. These pubs have such nasty habits."

Peter Cradd rose to his feet, brought out a bottle of whisky and a syphon, and several glasses. It was noticeable that both George and Henry followed the older guest's example. Their host also put a box of cigars and cigarettes upon the table, and squared his shoulders. He took his watch from his trousers pocket, and laid it before him.

"Now," he said, "here we are, and here are a few plain words for you. We've lived in that den in Park Avenue, Ealing—you, Harriet, and I, and the children as they made their appearance—all our lives. I don't think that I ever complained very much. I worked eight, nine, sometimes ten hours a day to keep the house going. I took no recreation. I spent, as you must all know, not one penny upon myself of any sort whatever. You all sought out your own pleasures. You all saw that you had something. You had your cinema, your tennis. George and Henry had their young women to entertain, Lena her young men to take her to dinners and theatres. I never interfered. You stripped me of every penny you could. Your mother commenced grumbling twenty years ago at my incapacity for earning a larger income. She never left off until the day I turned my back on Park Avenue. I tell you that in a year or two's time I should have died of sheer misery. You sometimes forgot, I think, you, my wife and children who looked upon me as a sort of mechanical contrivance out of which money was to be squeezed,

that I myself was staggering through life joyless, hungry and athirst, with a burden upon my shoulders which was slowly breaking me down. You may reflect upon this sometime. You'll have leisure to think now, like I have, and you may realise what a foully selfish crowd you were. . . . Any remarks ? "

" I don't see what pleasure I got out of life," Mrs. Cradd declared, " except for an odd cinema with Mrs. Benjamin now and then, and an odd tea party, and an afternoon at Kew or Richmond. It was hard enough work for me to keep the house going."

" Quite so," her husband agreed, " but in the name of the good God, why couldn't you have tried to keep it going with a cheerful word now and then, or a kind thought for the poor drudge who was working himself to a skeleton ? You boys both saw me give up smoking, and you knew what it cost me. It didn't affect your cigarettes, did it ? You knew why I had to do it. I don't remember your passing your cases round. Never mind. I've put my point of view before you. I never expected to be able to, but you understand now. That's the past. That's done with, but if you think for one moment, any of you, that I'm going to commence life again, even as a wealthy man, with you people who took all I had to give, and who grudged me my cigarette, my glass of beer, my morning paper, you're wrong. That's all."

There was an uneasy, embittered silence. Perhaps conscience was hovering about with her pointed shafts.

" What are you going to do about us then ? " Mrs. Cradd demanded lachrymosely.

" My lawyer says that the estate will realise nearly three hundred thousand pounds," her husband replied, tapping the paper upon the table. " I am

going to give you approximately half of it between you. My lawyer will arrange the matter. So long as you keep up a joint establishment, the bulk of it will be in your mother's name, with ample allowances for each of you, and a lump sum for George and Henry should they decide to go into business, and for Lena should she marry. You can all go in a body, if you like, to see Mr. Spearmain, and he will make everything plain to you. The rest of the money I shall keep myself, and understand this clearly, I shall live by myself, and I shall live my own life. It is now," this amazing parent continued, glancing at his watch, " half past five. At twenty minutes to six I shall be glad to see you walk down that path, enter that abominable motor-car, and drive off, and I tell you perfectly frankly, inhuman as it may sound, that I never wish to see one of you again."

" Gawd ! " Mr. Bloxom exclaimed.

" Father ! " Lena protested.

Mrs. Cradd searched for a handkerchief, and mopped at her eyes. Her face was very red, and the tears refused to come. She wiped the perspiration from her forehead instead. George was doing a calculation on his cuff.

" A hundred and fifty thousand pounds," he announced in a stage whisper, " is over seven thousand five hundred a year. Seven thousand five hundred pounds, mind you ! "

They completely forgot the donor of their fortune. They all looked at one another. There was the same expression in all their eyes—covetousness, greed, and the joy of easy living.

" Seven thousand five hundred a year ! " George muttered once more. " Who's going to do the sharing, dad ? "

" The solicitor whom I employ will work it out

and allow you exactly what is fair," Peter Cradd replied coldly. " Your mother, of course, will have the principal say in the matter. If there is any point upon which you are unable to arrive at an agreement, the lawyer can apply to me for a final decision. If you live at home, the matter, of course, is simple. If you separate, the allowances will be established by Mr. Spearmain."

" The question is," Mrs. Cradd propounded, leaning across the table, " whether we shall all want to live in the same place. Now, there's George here with ideas of his own, and Lena too. I'm rather for being the big bug in a little burg, than for being a little bug in a big burg. See what I mean, Sam ? " she added, turning to Mr. Bloxom. " Supposing we buy the Avenue House, for instance. Well, fancy that ! After living in the Avenue and being looked down on all these years ! Why, it would be wonderful ! "

" Who wants to live in Ealing ? " Lena sneered. " Not that I expect I shall very long. Why not try Kensington ? "

" Any place is better than Ealing," George agreed, " but if the allowance is good enough I think I shall have rooms of my own, and start a motor business."

" I shouldn't mind living at home for the present," Henry put in. " But I agree with Lena. I've had enough of Ealing."

" I might have known you children would have been against me," Mrs. Cradd bemoaned, again producing the handkerchief. " You hear them, Sam. It's all the time the same, ever since the bit of money began to come in. Everyone wants to do something different, and everyone wants to do it their own way."

" If you will pardon me intervening," Peter

Cradd, who had been completely forgotten, murmured, "I will tell you why that is. It is because I think that you are the four most selfish people upon this earth. I have watched you all for a great many years, although I have never uttered a single word of reproof. I had no time for words; no spirit for them, perhaps. But it is good for you sometimes to know the truth. You can make what you will out of your lives now. You have the money you craved. Everything is before you. Go and do it, but unless you learn the lesson of every now and then considering the other person's wishes, you'll all the time be wrangling and dissatisfied, just as you were when we were all poverty-stricken."

"Hear the guv'nor!" George exclaimed.

"Giving tongue at last, aren't you, dad?" Lena observed flippantly.

"I am criticising you freely," their father concluded, "because I now make this frank admission. I am the greatest egoist of the lot of you. I might devote the last few years of my life to still more suffering, by trying to make you see things differently, by trying to make you understand how poor and limited your ideas of life are, by trying to point out to you a surer way of finding happiness. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to live my own life, and find happiness my own way, and I don't care a damn what becomes of any of you."

"I suppose this is your father," Mrs. Cradd mumbled, looking at him doubtfully.

"Wouldn't have believed he'd got it in him," Mr. Bloxom declared, "seeing him hobbling past my place morning and night all these years, with his little black bag and his umbrella, and not a look right or left, and not a word even to a neighbour. Never thought he'd got it in him."

"We never can tell," Peter Cradd pronounced, "what effect freedom may have upon a slave. And now, my esteemed family, and my guest, your time is up. Fill your pockets with my cigars, if you will, George and Henry. A little more whisky and soda, Mr. Bloxom? Certainly. Help yourself—only as quickly as possible, if you please."

"You'll join us, Mr. Cradd?"

Their host shook his head.

"Thank you," he declined. "You know what I think of all of you. I'll have a drink by myself when I see you packed into that hideous car, and when you're safely gone."

"It's not my business, of course," Mr. Bloxom admitted, gulping down his whisky and soda—"family affair, and that—but aren't you coming it a bit hard, Mr. Cradd? There's your wife now."

"She can speak for herself," Peter Cradd interrupted coldly. "My wife can go back through the last twenty years, and ask herself whether she has anything to complain of."

Mrs. Cradd rose to her feet. She preferred not to look back through the last twenty years.

"It's a custom of mine," she observed, "never to stay where I'm not wanted."

"Coming it a bit thick, you know, dad," Lena protested, putting away her vanity box after she had succeeded in touching up her lips and her cheeks. "What about if one of us dies?"

"I should have mentioned that," her father acknowledged, rising. "If any one of you should have the misfortune to die, I will come to your funeral. If any one of you younger ones should get married, I will come to your wedding, and I will make the customary present. But if any of you intrude upon the life I intend to lead, visit me with-

out permission, or make yourselves in any way a nuisance to me—wife, daughter, or sons—I call upon Mr. Spearmain, and I change my dispositions."

"So that's that!" George ejaculated. "Found his voice all right, the guv'nor, after all these years, hasn't he?"

He led the way to the gate. Mrs. Skidmore, more hospitable than her master, was just fetching away the tea with which she had served the chauffeur. The man wiped the back of his mouth, and looked a little sheepishly at Mr. Cradd. He probably looked a little sheepishly at all the world, for the garish yellow of the car was reproduced in the facings of his coat, and in his hat, and he knew very well that he was an object of derision to his fellow-chauffeurs. Nevertheless, Mrs. Cradd mounted proudly to her seat. Mr. Bloxom sat by her side. George went in front, and they all drove away. The farewell salutes were constrained. Mr. Bloxom raised his hat. Mrs. Cradd brought out her handkerchief again. Lena kissed her fingers. The two young men waved their hands. Peter Cradd stood gravely at the gate, bareheaded, and watched the vehicle until it was out of sight. Then he walked back to the terrace, dragged out a *chaise longue*, took the volume of Swinburne which he had been carrying about with him, from his pocket, mixed himself a rather strong whisky and soda, lit a cigarette, and, with a sigh of deep content, settled down to happiness.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XI

LOUISE was like an uneasy spirit that evening. She wandered around the house, played the piano for a little time, sat down and struck a few notes

upon an old harpsichord, walked slowly up and down the terraced walk which led to the rose garden, but seemed unable to find a resting-place. Her brother, who was struggling with a sermon, looked up, frowning.

"What's the matter with you, Louise?" he asked irritably. "Why can't you settle down to something?"

"Why should I?"

"You create a spirit of unrest," he explained. "It is becoming catching. How in the name of my wrong-headed churchwardens am I to write a fresh sermon each week, as they think I ought to, if I can't get a few minutes' peace?"

"The great mistake you make," she confided, seating herself upon the edge of his desk, "is that you take too much trouble about your sermons. Give them a few words of the real stuff, and don't take a manuscript with you at all. Tell Jimmy Boulter, for instance, that the fishermen in the New Testament didn't pinch one another's nets, or one another's lobster pots, and Jacob Griggs that the apostles knew how to take their wine like gentlemen and kept sober. Drive it home to them, dear brother."

He turned his head, and looked at her, slim and elegant, in a plain, closely fitting black dress, dangling her flesh-coloured silk-stockinged legs close to his chair. She looked at him through a haze of cigarette smoke, with a twinkle in her eyes.

"All sermons," she concluded, "should be more secularised. Take my tip, George."

"And lose my living," he grunted. "We'd have the Bishop here in a week. You know as well as I do, Louise, that there's nothing but the old stuff goes down with these people. Why don't you find an arm-chair and read, or do something? You

ought to be tired with that long day out of doors. What's on your mind ? "

" I'm wondering all the time, George," she acknowledged, " how your protégé got on with that awful avalanche of his family ! "

Mr. Barnslow pushed aside his few written sheets.

" I've been thinking about that, too," he admitted. " Do you know," he went on, stretching out his hand for his pipe and slowly lighting it, " I always realised that he was a truthful little fellow, of course, but I never swallowed his story exactly until I saw those people. I couldn't have believed that he had it in him to describe them so amazingly. There they all were, and I suppose the gentleman who looked like a bookmaker in the grey hat——"

" Now, no scandal, George."

" Who's going to talk scandal ? " he scoffed. " What I mean is that he is their adviser. He was probably brought down to do the bully."

" Somehow or other," she reflected, " I don't believe he would find it easy to bully Mr. Cradd. . . . George."

" Now what is it ? Out with it," he begged.

" You want some books. I'll take you down in the car. You said yourself that you must have your Paley and those glossaries before you wrote any more sermons. I'll run you down. It's a gorgeous night. If the place seems quiet we'll go in and hear all about it. If there's a row going on, we'll just drive past."

" All right," he assented. " Might as well let you have your own way, I suppose."

She was gone from the room like the dive of a swallow. By the time he appeared at the front, with his stick and hat, the car was there. She sat in the driving seat, bareheaded, the moon shining

on her witch-dark hair. Even her brother looked at her in admiration.

"I can't think why in heaven's name, Louise," he observed, as they drove off down the avenue, "you don't marry."

"Why should I?" she drawled. "I have a pretty good time in London, and down here everyone's very nice to me."

"But why shouldn't you?" he rejoined. "No parishioner being within hearing, you're the best-looking woman I ever saw in my life. You've got something about you, which, if I were not your brother, would send me crazy. Why don't you marry Arthur Durcott? He was in here this afternoon, pitching the same old yarn. Influence over you, indeed! As though I or anyone else could ever have any! You're not hanging on for one of these artist chaps in London, I hope! I hate the whole crew."

"You would," she answered, with a demure little smile. "They are wild, George, I admit that, but if you only have a sense of humour there is always fun to be got out of them, and one or two—only one or two, mind—have talent. The trouble is, the more talent they have the more conventional they are. The very finest painter I know works indoors in a morning suit and out-of-doors in the very best cut plus fours you can possibly imagine. That's where the artistic life sometimes becomes a little disappointing."

"Can't stand these chaps who go about in dirty sweaters and overalls and floppy hats and nasty, unwholesome faces," George Barnslow grumbled. "It's all very well if you're doing a man's job to strip yourself of clothes, but they ain't. I hate 'em all!"

The car pulled up with a jerk.

"George," she whispered in his ear, "I think I dare go so far as to promise you that I will not marry an artist. Not that one or two haven't asked me," she went on, as she shut off the engine—"in fact there's one asks me nearly every week—but he hasn't the ghost of a chance. I shall probably marry some impossible person—it may be Durcott—if only he leaves off parting his hair. . . . There's no one here, George. They've left the poor man in peace. Shall we go in and hear tales of battle?"

"So long as I've been dragged down here, I want my books," he agreed. "Come on."

They crossed the lawn—Barnslow with his heavy, lumbering stride, Louise with feet which seemed scarcely to touch the velvety turf. In a corner of the terrace, stretched in his *chaise longue*, with a lamp by his side, a little pile of books, and a box of cigarettes, sat Peter Cradd. He scrambled to his feet at their approach.

"I say, this is very nice of you!" he exclaimed. "Do come in, or shall we bring chairs out here? Will you have a cigar, Vicar?"

"One of yours, I will, Cradd," was the hearty response. "The Laranagas, if you don't mind."

"They're all here," Peter Cradd said, producing a box. "I sent to the place you told me in St. James's Street, and they seem awfully good."

"Still Swinburne, I see," Louise remarked, picking up the volume which he had laid down.

His eyes glowed for a moment as they met hers. She felt a queer new respect for him from the fact that he was able to restrain his enthusiasm.

"Well, we've come like good neighbours to hear the news," she added, as she settled herself down. "Tell us all about it, Mr. Cradd."

He looked away over the low wall into the

shadowy distance, and his face in the uncertain light seemed almost stern.

"I dealt with them," he acknowledged, "as I had always meant to deal with them, if such a meeting should take place. After they had gone, I began to have doubts."

"What sort of doubts?" she whispered softly.

"I began to wonder whether, after all, I was justified in dismissing them all because they failed to please me, that perhaps life was meant to be nothing but an absolute sacrifice to other people, and that those people who sacrificed the most got the most out of it."

"Steady on, man!" Mr. Barnslow interrupted. "That's my job, to talk like that."

"Well, it certainly isn't mine," Peter Cradd admitted. "I just had an idea that your sister—I hope this doesn't sound presumptuous—wanted to know exactly how I felt about it all. Everything that passed was terribly sordid. I just had that feeling afterwards."

"Then I hope you'll get rid of it as soon as possible," Louise said, leaning forward and helping herself to a cigarette. "You've been through your purgatory, and from what I have seen of your people they'll be just as happy without you. But the details, please. George and I are terribly interested. Yours is such a simple story, and yet one feels that it must be happening all the time to hundreds and thousands who never escape."

"Well, I am one of the lucky ones," Peter Cradd said, with a glance around him, and a deep sigh of relief. "Anyhow, this is just what happened. There was a little awkwardness on the quay and a few reproaches. I stopped that at once, and brought them down here. I set them round a tea-table, and I told them just what was in my mind.

I went through my life year after year since the days of my marriage, and I know that what I told them was the truth. My wife has never had a single kindly thought in her mind for the slave who was working for the household. I never had one word of encouragement from her or the children. It was just, 'Why can't you be like Mr. this, or Mr. that, and earn more money?' The children were just as bad as their mother. Money was what they wanted, pleasure—any sort of pleasure—money to stand a drink to a pick-up girl for George and Henry, a client who was good for a dinner and theatre for Lena, a few of the pounds I was sweating my soul for to buy the finery to go to a race meeting for their mother. I just reminded them of it all. I traced the history of the years. They weren't absolutely fools, and I told them point blank that the beast of burden had turned the greatest egoist of them all. Here I am with a magnificent vein of selfishness poisoning my system. I don't care. It's there, and it's going to stop. I showed them papers, told them how much my estate would probably realise. I am writing to the lawyer to-morrow, giving him instructions. I have promised them half so long as they keep away, and with the other half I am just going to find out the things in life that seem worth finding out. I have begun already," he added, with a deep sigh of content.

"An individualist, you might be called," Louise murmured, "not an egoist."

"All right," he assented, "I'm that. Have a whisky and soda, Vicar?"

"I will," the latter acquiesced.

Peter Cradd hurried away, and returned with a decanter, syphon, and two glasses.

"Sorry I have nothing to offer you, Miss Barns-

low," he regretted, " unless you'd let me fetch you some wine."

" My dear man," she told him, " when the possible time for cocktails has passed, I am as temperate a young woman as you could find anywhere. A little absinthe sometimes, in Chelsea—it seems so much in the atmosphere—but that is only occasionally. I see your water jug on the sideboard. Give me some, please. Of course you know that there's nothing so pure in the world as the water from our well, or rather yours."

" I don't drink a great deal of it," Peter Cradd admitted, " but I find it quite good."

He filled her glass. They sat around the table, a very friendly little trio. Peter Cradd was filled with gratitude and a certain amount of mild wonder. It seemed so amazing that he, who had led such a miserable, humiliating life, should sit here, happy and at his ease, with these two people who had lived all their lives in such a different world, and that they had troubled to come and find out about him. His eyes were almost moist as he sipped his whisky and soda.

" So they really accepted it all? " Louise asked presently. " They went away quietly? "

A slow, reminiscent smile crept across Peter Cradd's face.

" As soon as I had announced how much they were going to have," he confided, " they forgot all about me. They began to quarrel about their allowances. They leaned across the table, and argued. I really think they forgot I was there. Yes," he went on, after a moment's pause, " they've gone. They know that if they interfere with me in any way they will suffer financially. That's quite enough for them. Four people, all with the same idea. They're all aching to fill their pockets with

this money, and gorge themselves with pleasure. Not one of them cares really a jot about the other. They'd just as soon separate, and do it alone, or with the companions they are likely to pick up. I could see George and Henry thinking it out—Lena, too. It would be cheaper to have a common household to start with. Well, I wish them joy of everything that comes to them."

"But you, Peter Cradd," the Vicar declared, his voice booming out through the stillness so that the bats lurking in the shadows behind came flying around them—"you mustn't spend all your life down here, you know. It's a man's life, I admit, the way you're taking it, and the way you brought that boat in this evening made me want to come and pat you on the back, but this won't do for all the time. You've got to travel."

"Yes," he sighed, "I suppose I must travel."

"You must go round the world," Mr. Barnslow insisted.

Peter Cradd shivered.

"Must I?" he pleaded.

"You must indeed. When you have made a modern pilgrimage you must take in a little more intimate travel. You must go to Italy."

"I think I'll start with that," Peter Cradd murmured.

"You must see all the great pictures and the great statuary," the Vicar went on. "You must learn to understand something about art. You must go to Palestine, to Jerusalem. Perhaps you'd come back not such a pagan."

"I'm not a pagan," Peter Cradd objected. "If I were a pagan—I don't quite know what it means—but shouldn't I be worshipping other gods? I don't worship any god because I don't understand about any."

" Two afternoons a week," Mr. Barnslow decided firmly, " must I give to your spiritual education, my parishioner."

His victim groaned.

" Do you want to drive me out of the place," he complained, " just as I've bought your house ? "

" George," his sister interposed, " you're frightening him. I will not have it. He is taking you too much in earnest. One hour a week is quite sufficient for you to give him an insight into the doctrines of the Church. As regards his artistic education, that is my department. I am not at all sure that I shall not take him myself to Florence and Rome."

" Good God ! " her brother exclaimed.

" I mean it," she went on, leaning a little farther back in her chair, and seeking in the sky for one particular star. " All my life I have thought how wonderful it would be to take someone with a virgin mind to look at the pictures which I worship, to just watch their effect and compare impressions."

" You'd had more training than our friend here."

" All the training I've had," she insisted earnestly, " was training I should have been better without. It was board school and art mistress training. It's the worst and most hindering stuff in the world. You should make your knock at the door of the world of art as supremely ignorant as you can possibly be. You don't want a smudged canvas upon which to commence great work."

" I shall be disagreeable," the Vicar blustered— " I know I shall be disagreeable. What I shall say may sound offensive. Can't help it. You're talking of children's minds, Louise. Mr. Cradd is forty-six years old. Think what those forty-six years have meant in his own case. Forty-six years of ugly, sordid life, day by day hackneyed work,

striving to make a living, counting the shillings and the pence, drab home, in a depressing suburb. Forty-six years of that! Oh, my fool of a sister! And how are you going to lead your pilgrim to the golden gates after thirty years of Bermondsey and Ealing?"

"You know," Louise confided, taking the cigarette from her lips, "that's the way George should preach. He spoils himself with writing things on sermon paper about the prophets and what they said or didn't say, until we all yawn, and those of us who are out of sight go to sleep. Now you were almost eloquent then, George. And the fact that you knew nothing at all of what you were talking about didn't make the slightest difference."

"Didn't know what I was talking about, eh?"

"Not much, dear. You see, all the time in Mr. Cradd there is the desire—there always was the desire—to escape. He knew he was in an ugly prison house. See how he forced his way out as soon as he had the chance. Isn't that the proof that his imagination, the real tablets, are untouched? No, I think I shall take Mr. Cradd to Florence."

"There's a Bradshaw," the latter ventured, "in the study."

"Not yet," she told him. "Not for some time, Peter Cradd. "We haven't finished with the summer, and the autumn—well that must be got rid of somehow—but it is in April or May, perhaps, that one goes to Florence."

"It seems a long time to wait," Peter Cradd complained.

"And we've been here a long time," Mr. Barnslow remarked, looking at his watch. "Louise."

"You haven't found your books yet," she reminded him.

" I'll just get my glossaries. Shan't trouble to find anything else."

He stooped, and disappeared through the French windows leading to the study. It seemed to Peter Cradd that he was intensely conscious of the few moments' silence that followed. He would have spoken, but a curious paralysing indecision seized upon him. He wanted to say something vital, to express some of the thankfulness that was in his heart, and he found it so difficult.

" We didn't bother you, coming down ? " she asked.

" I think it was very good of you," he answered gravely.

" You seemed happy enough here alone."

" I was happy," he admitted, " but," he added, with a brave little burst, " I was happier after you had come."

They could hear her brother growling inside. Someone had misplaced a volume. Peter Cradd was probably the culprit, but they took no notice.

" You are really going to take me to Seagull's Island again to-morrow morning ? " she enquired.

" If I may," he assented eagerly. " I've told Mrs. Skidmore about the lunch. I don't think I've forgotten anything."

" I want to come," she assured him. " I can't imagine why I want to finish my picture so much, but I do, and after to-morrow it is going to be difficult."

" Why ? " he asked, with a sudden tremor of anxiety.

" All the people are coming down to Cariswood," she explained, " and—they mean to be hospitable, I know—but they seem to think that I am stranded here and must be fetched away every moment. And there's a man over there—just at the back

of that star," she added, pointing away inland, " who wants me to marry him. He's been at the house this afternoon. He's dining at Cariswood to-morrow night, and I know he'll make himself a nuisance. The place is going to be crowded directly, and I like it better," she added, " as it is."

His heart sank. She smiled at the change in his expression, and, herself curiously undemonstrative, through a sort of fine antipathy against all physical contact, leaned over and did what was for her a rare thing. She took his hand, held it for a moment, and patted it kindly before she let it go.

" Never mind, dear Peter Cradd," she whispered; " I like being with you. I shall be with you as often as I can. Do you feel less depressed now, please ? "

His lips quivered and parted, but he said nothing.

" Hang it all, Cradd, what have you done with my Bible ? " the Vicar thundered from the threshold.

THERE was nothing in the earlier hours of the following day to suggest the hovering drama. Louise was in somewhat silent mood, perhaps in sympathy with a certain brooding stillness which hung over the land, the heat which, even for midsummer, seemed tremendous. They had scarcely landed on Seagull's Island, and established Louise at her easel, before Peter Cradd was in the sea. He remained there far longer than usual, but as soon as he stepped out on to the beach, a moist and sticky clamminess once more hung about his body. He clambered on to the top of the ridge of hillocks and looked around. The sun was shining, but there was

a faint, gauzy veil around it which seemed only to intensify its rays, a veil, too, which seemed to draw the colour from the blue sky as it spread seaward. There was scarcely a breath of wind, but the sea had taken on a long, oily swell. He made his way to where Louise was painting.

" May I come and sit with you ? " he asked.

" Come, but don't speak to me," she begged, without looking round. " This is what I have been waiting for."

She had thrown off her sweater, and was standing there, clad in only some thin, mysterious garment, and her linen skirt. There was a gleam of unusual excitement in her eyes. She was painting rapidly, almost desperately it appeared to him, as he watched her brush fly to the palette and back again—all the little impedimenta of her craft touched with swift and nimble fingers. Every now and then she glanced at a spot southward where there seemed to him to be little of distinction—a spot between the outside reef of sand and the round, forsaken watch-tower over the Cley coast. Then again she bent over her task, and he saw strange things creeping on to the canvas, incomprehensible things to him at that moment. She was breathing quickly, as though she had been running, and suddenly she spoke without turning her head.

" Fetch me a cocktail," she begged.

He hurried off, brought the shaker to her side, and poured her out a foaming glass. The fingers which gripped it, usually so firm, shook. She leaned away from the canvas as she drank, and some of the contents of her glass were spilt on to the sand.

" Is there any more ? " she asked.

" Heaps."

She drank again, and returned to her work.

" Dear man," she murmured, " you have given

me just what I wanted. Have your own cocktail, please."

He wandered a little away, but he was very soon back again, watching her with fascinated eyes. Then up to them came Large, with trouble in his face.

"Mr. Cradd, sir," he said, "I'm sorry to be disturbing you, but I don't like the look of the weather. There's something brewing that I don't rightly understand. I think we'd do well to get back on the tide. You can maybe eat your lunch as we go."

Peter Cradd turned to his companion. She took no notice, only waved her hand impatiently.

"A little longer, Large," she begged—"just a little longer. I've waited years for this."

The man hesitated.

"I'm not disturbing your leddyship for nothing," he assured her. "It do seem to me a rare strange spell of weather that be coming on us, though with the wind behind. The channel's swollen already, and I can't see for why."

Still she took no notice. She painted on, and suddenly it seemed to Cradd as he stood there that he saw what was coming out on to the canvas, something breaking out of the sea and staring out of the riven skies, something with a horizon which seemed pierced by those last feverish strokes of her brush. Then a curious thing happened. Without a moment's warning there was a wind in their faces —a still, soft, yet somehow menacing wind—coming from nowhere. Large held up his hand, and then back he came again with all the superstitious terror of the seaman in his eyes.

"Your leddyship," he said, "there may be time or there may not, but it's for life or death that we start this instant."

One more rapid movement of the brush, and she looked around with a little cry of triumph. Her voice unexpectedly broke.

" All these years," she faltered, " and I think it's come. I think——"

Peter Cradd's smile shone into hers. He held out his hand and they stood for a moment, their fingers locked. Then there came a gust of wind with no sign or warning of its coming, which nearly blew them over. She caught at her canvas. He pointed seaward and she gave a little cry of dismay. The sea, which had seemed so wonderful a thing only a quarter of an hour before, had suddenly become a writhing, oily horror, rolling landwards in great undulations like a devouring, sinister element, new to the world, advancing to engulf. In the far distance the horizon had faded away. There was a grey mist of something, from sea or heavens they could not tell.

" God, what a storm ! " Cradd muttered. " Leave the easel ! Come ! "

He carried the canvas face downward, snatched at their luncheon basket, and together they made for the pool. Large was already in the boat, which was rising and falling like a huge rocking-horse.

" Never mind your clothes, my leddy," Large shouted, " nor you, sir. Just walk through it if you can. I'll pull you aboard."

They stepped into what was now a seething cauldron, a few moments ago a stagnant pool. All the time, Cradd held the canvas face downward, high above his head. Once he nearly fell, but steadied himself after a frantic struggle.

" It dries in an instant," she told him. " It's all right now, but keep the water from it."

The boat heeled over as they stepped on board. With a terrific effort, Large righted it, and they

scrambled somehow into a foot of water. There was a locker in the stern where Large kept his food and some oddments. Cradd tore off his jersey and shirt, wrapped them round the picture, and pushed it in. He slammed the door to, and gripped the tiller as the anchor came up. Large was on all fours on the deck with the rope of the sail twisted about his wrist.

"Swing her round, sir," he shouted. "There's only one thing to do, keep her into the wind and don't look behind. Just drive her into it for home."

"What about staying on the Island?" Peter Cradd demanded.

Large pointed out seaward. They saw what seemed a great upheaval. It was like an earthquake of living seas down-curled, with little tongues crawling and leaping, falling over themselves.

"That'll be over the Island in ten minutes, sir," he cried hoarsely. "Our chance is to ride for it."

The wind caught the sail with a sound like the booming of a gun. Over they heeled.

"Bale her, your leddyship," Large shouted.

She was at work in a moment, kneeling at her task. They flew across the great basin, and Cradd found time, with both hands blue with the strain of the tiller, and his bare feet clenching the boards, to laugh into her face.

"The ride of our lives!" he called out. "We shall be home in ten minutes at this rate."

She pointed towards Cley.

"Look what's coming."

Without sign or warning, from the lighthouse near Weyborne to Brancaster Point, the heavens opened. Then they suddenly realised that before they had been almost in darkness in the middle of a summer afternoon. The roar as of a thousand guns

seemed to split their ears. Large looked up for a moment, breathless.

"That won't do us no harm," he bawled. "You're holding her bravely, mister, but, my God, there's the corner. Keep her fifteen yards to the middle of the channel. Don't let her get an inch too far, or she'll wrench the arms out of you. We'll make it!"

A gun went off from the coastguard station.

"A fisherman outside, maybe, or they've seen us," Large muttered. "There's no one can help us, though. My, your leddyship, if we never live through it, there's a sight."

Away on the left of them, where there were foot-paths and marshy tracks, across which men hunted wild duck and snipe, came great monsters of the sea—huge yellow masses foaming and breaking, thundering on towards the land. A hut built for one of the bird sanctuary inspectors, a solidly constructed place of two stories with a boat-house attached, was smashed like a piece of matchboard, and tumbled into what was now a plain of waters. Large, with his one arm round the mast, stood up.

"Gawd!" he groaned. "We'll never see the water-way. There's the tops of the posts on the left, mister. That's the line, if you can keep it. Fifteen yards now. Both arms, and God help you. If I try to lend you a hand we're in ribbons."

Louise laughed up at the little man gripping the helm—a crouching figure, holding on with both hands, and one foot at the bottom of a seat.

"You'll do it," she said.

And he did. Round they swung just at the right moment, dead between the two posts, round again, and now the port was in sight—a dim vista of houses through the driving rain, a clearer vista of them as once more the heavens were ablaze. The roar of the thunder was almost like music to them,

although the boat shook in every timber. The blood was streaming down Large's wrist, but he never noticed it.

" Bravo, Mr. Cradd ! " he shouted. " Keep a heart, your leddyship. We'll see you through. Now the next turn, Mr. Cradd. Take her slick at yon tall post, drive her before the wind, and swing her fifteen yards short. Pray God there isn't another squall before we reach it."

Something hit the waters like an enormous yellow ball in front of them. They were already drenched to the skin, but the spray came down upon them now in torrents. On it went, booming towards the land. Large laughed with hysterical joy.

" We're clear of that mischief, anyway," he thundered. " There's the pole, sir. Now's your time. Gawd, he's done it again ! "

Another corner. The rain was falling now in great drops so that the head of the boat was scarcely visible from the stern. The door of the locker flew open. Cradd kicked it feverishly with his foot, held it there until it stuck.

" We're taking the picture home," he cried.

" Hold her up, sir;" Large shouted. " For God's sake, hold her up. It's the tail end of it."

For a moment they were engulfed. A great wave smashed down upon them. The locker house went flat. Large, with the rope still wound about his wrist, was tumbled over. Cradd swayed for one moment perilously. It was the tiller, or overboard. Suddenly he felt her arms round his neck. They crouched there locked together, and slowly the boat righted itself. Way ahead of them the wild sea went tossing in.

" If this is death," Cradd muttered, holding like mad to the tiller with the grip of her arms steadying him—" if this is death ! "

She saw the joy in his spray-beaten face, his eyes still striving to mark the way, and she laughed.

"Better than forty-six years of misery this—a half-hour's fight for life!"

"For paradise," he answered.

Large stumbled half to his knees. His head had been hurt against the mast, and there was blood all over his face. There was blood upon Peter Cradd's too, dripping from his cheek-bone to the deck.

"We're safe, sir," Large gasped. "We're through it. We're in port before another of them catches us. Mr. Cradd, do you mind about the boat?"

"Not a damn!"

"Drive her straight on to the quay. See, the water's feet deep up on the docks there. She'll carry the stone edge. If you try to swing her she'll capsize. Drive her straight into the hotel, if she'll go, and jump like the devil when she grounds. See where them life-lines are massed. She'll carry half-way across. Let her go straight."

"I'll hold her straight enough," Cradd muttered between his clenched teeth.

The arms round his neck were slackening a little. He felt her cold wet hand suddenly pressed against his lips, and he kissed it passionately. Almost at that moment, the darkness lifted. Large, who was looking seaward, laughed crazily.

"There's the sun," he cried—"that there red thing. Now drive her to it, sir. Drive her straight for the hotel. Don't 'e mind. Hold her tight."

A huge wave carried them to the middle of the road. Through the gloom they saw a hundred murky figures springing towards them. Crashing

of stonework, the splintering of timber, the thunder of the seas, the bruising of limbs—then the greater darkness. . . .

Peter Cradd found himself with his back to the hotel wall, a brandy flask at his lips, a little group gathered around, and Large swinging his arms and shouting to a crowd a short distance away. And, under Cradd's right arm there was something which he had snatched at and held all through that last wild burst—her picture !—his jersey and shirt still protecting it.

The brandy was like living fire down his throat. He opened his eyes once more. Before him was a wonderful sight—a huge, tumbled mass of waters, the wreckage of boats, great waves the spray of which still beat upon his face, but the darkness had lifted, the thunder was muttering away in the distance. Westward was a faint gleam of sunshine. Close at hand he could hear Large still talking as he swung his one arm.

" I've sailed with 'em all," he was saying. " Sailed with them as I've taught to handle a boat for twenty years, but I never seed anything like that little man. Know'd nothing about it. Came to me, didn't know which end of a boat was the stern, never touched a tiller. My God, and he stood with his bare feet gripping at the seat, and the blood bursting out of his knuckles and her leddyship holding him up, and his face—my God, his face as set and hard as a bit of wood, just watching the posts when I shouted, and his eyes like sparks of fire. I tell you, he got it to a yard every time. I never seed anything like it, and when I called out to him to drive her straight on to the quay—my Gawd, I thought we was over the last turn, but her leddyship she was gripping him, on her knees and

her clothes half off, and I swear as we drove that last forty yards—them waves on the top of us—I swear he was laughing. Don't talk to me about Londoners again. Give me one on 'em every time."

The voices died away. Two fishermen had arrived with barrels of beer from the public house, and there was a gurgling silence. Peter Cradd looked around, and found that one of the arms supporting him was the Vicar's.

"Take another drink, old fellow. That was a fine show of yours. How are you feeling?"

"I'm quite all right," Peter Cradd answered, trying to struggle to his feet.

"Stay where you are for a minute," the Vicar enjoined.

"What about—your sister?"

"She's all right—thanks to you. The Caris-woods were waiting here to take her back. They've driven her up to the Vicarage. What's that under your arm?"

"The picture," Peter Cradd said a little pitifully. "I wanted to give it to her."

Then suddenly she came, a long overcoat around her, leaning on the arm of a tall man in tweeds and mackintosh.

"I couldn't go," she cried, "without speaking to you. You're all right, Mr. Cradd?"

"Quite all right now, thank you," he assured her. "Here's your picture."

He tried to lift his arm, and suddenly found it impossible. She stooped down. The picture was safely there, but the arm which clenched it, fell away like a dead thing.

"My God, it's broken!" Barnslow grunted.

Then there happened to Peter Cradd what had never happened to any other man in the world—

she leaned down, because in once more struggling to get up he had staggered and slipped a little, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Peter Cradd," she whispered, "you are a hero."

He was just in time to hear the words, for the singing in his ears, so unaccountable it had seemed, had become louder and louder, and earth and sky faded away.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XIII

PETER CRADD, whose arm was rather badly broken, passed a week of discomfort and pain. At the end of that time, however, he was permitted to lie in a *chaise longue* in the sunlight upon the terrace and to take up the broken thread of his life. He asked the hospital nurse, who had attended to him, rather timidly about visitors. The Vicar had called every day, he was told. Ben Large had been up twice, and one or two other of the stray inhabitants had left messages. He listened in silence. As soon as he had had his lunch, he lay with his face turned towards the gate. Beyond, over the low wall, he could see the scant meadow, and the sandy marsh, riven by the small arms of the sea—farther still away, the more important channels, the main one up which the tide was now flowing calmly, still and tranquil as a country stream. There were several white sails bobbing about, a pleasant murmur of bees, the chirping of birds in the air, and the hum of a mowing machine in the field at the back—almost every sound a man could think of to provoke slumber. But Peter Cradd lay with his eyes upon the gate. It swung open at last, and in came the Vicar—alone. He

crossed the lawn with great strides, and began to shout when he was still a dozen yards off.

"Capital, Cradd—capital. That's the way to get well. How's the arm, eh?"

"Much better," the invalid admitted. "I can almost move it. I'm all right. The nurse says I shall be walking about in a few days. She's going back to Norwich on Thursday, I think."

The Vicar dragged up a basket chair.

"Smoke upset you?"

"Not a bit in the world. You can bring me a cigarette, if you don't mind. I don't think I could quite manage a pipe yet."

Mr. Barnslow selected one from the box, placed it between Peter Cradd's lips, and held a match to it. Then he filled his own pipe.

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "Well, that was a rare doing you and Louise tumbled into."

"It was indeed. I never dreamed there could be such a storm in this part of the world. How is Miss Barnslow?"

"All right, I expect," was the somewhat grumpy reply. "She never writes. She's worse than I am that way."

Peter Cradd shaded his eyes from the sun. Then he closed them for a few moments.

"She's gone away then?" he ventured.

His visitor nodded.

"The Cariswoods took her back with them. She'll be home sometime later in the summer, I expect."

Peter Cradd's brain was a little tired, and he didn't seem to be able quite to figure it all out. She had gone away. He had searched carefully through his letters. There had been nothing—no message—just gone away, back to her own people, to where she belonged. It was quite all right.

They had been out in a storm together—he, Peter Cradd, forty-six years old, with a wife—terrible—and a family—worse. Of course, he had been a little delirious the last few days. He had drifted into fancying things. Life was coming back now—real actual life. Nevertheless, he hovered for a moment round the subject.

"Was the picture hurt?" he asked.

"Not a bit," the Vicar assured him. "How you held on to it those last few minutes, Louise says she can't imagine. None of the others see much in it—to tell you the truth I can't myself—but she's almost crazy about it, and I suppose she knows."

"I'm glad," Peter Cradd said simply.

"You'll have to take things quietly for a time," Mr. Barnslow enjoined with a side glance at the pale little figure by his side. "Give you a good chance to do some reading, eh?"

"That's what I want."

The Vicar leaned back in his chair, and smoked deliberately. He was an untidy man, and the grey woollen socks almost lopped over the tops of his clumsy boots. He had probably never heard of a sock suspender in his life.

"I like you, Cradd," he said deliberately. "We both like you—Louise, too. I want to see you make the best of this curious liberation of yours. Shall I tell you what you need, man?"

"Please do," Peter Cradd murmured, feeling that he knew pretty well himself.

"Your balances—the points of the compass of life. Naturally, you haven't got them marked. You're a poor babe of forty-six—worse than a new-born babe. You've got a lot to forget as well as a lot to learn. You'll do it all right. You've got what I call a sensitive brain of your

own, if it isn't brilliant. You'll pick things up, and when you begin to learn where you are in the world, you'll begin to understand the things that are best for you, the things you can't have, and the things you'll get most out of."

"Yes," Peter Cradd agreed humbly.

"Reading will help you, naturally," the Vicar continued, "but as to any definite course of study, that's all rubbish. Read what you feel like. Pick up the books at hazard. My lot aren't much good, mostly theological, and old-fashioned stuff that wouldn't get you anywhere. Louise tells me she's given you a start, but don't take too much notice of her. She's a fantastic creature at the best of times. Finish what you want to finish, and chuck away what doesn't seem to fit. What about a whisky and soda for me, Cradd? Can I go in and help myself."

"Please do, or nurse will come if you ring that bell."

The Vicar preferred to help himself. He returned in a few minutes from the library, carrying his tumbler with him.

"You needn't be afraid," he went on, resuming his seat, "that I want you to read what the ordinary person would call 'religious works.' I never think you can drive religion into anyone that way, any more than you can bang it into them with the cymbals and drums of the Salvation Army. One's sense of right living has first of all to be inherent, and then it has to grow. Follow me, Cradd?"

"I think so."

"There's no doubt about your having the sense of the thing. You've got the right instincts. As to the way you're behaving to your family—well, you know what the world would say of that—

but every man has to be the judge of his own actions up to a certain point, and I must admit you're a bit convincing about it. I've seen them, too," he added, with a twinkle in his black eyes.

Peter Cradd moved uneasily upon his couch.

" I couldn't help them," he pointed out. " I couldn't change them. It would be hell to me to live with them. I've given them what they wanted. If they don't get what they expect out of it it's their own fault."

" You're near enough right," his spiritual mentor agreed. " Now about yourself. What are you going to do when you get well ? "

A faintly warmer shade of interest stole into Peter Cradd's tone.

" As soon as my new boat's ready," he confided, " I shall hire a boy to help Ben Large, and we're going out sailing every day. When the sun shines I shall lie on one of the islands or sand-banks and read. Directly my arm is strong again, I shall swim."

" That's all right," the other admitted, " you'll get tired of it in time though."

" I'm not so sure," was the quiet reply. " For twenty-five years I have done a little more work than any man ought to do—ugly, humiliating work, too. I've earned my rest."

" I expect you're right," the Vicar agreed, " but the autumn's no catch here, I can tell you—grey mists rolling up, hanging round the house, all the marshes like a wet bog. There's a wind comes across from the Point there enough to give you ague in your bones. There are some good days, of course, but there are some darned bad 'uns too. You'd better travel in the autumn, Cradd."

" I may," the latter conceded meditatively.

"There's London, first of all. I don't know London."

The Vicar stared at him.

"Why, I thought you said you'd lived there all your life?"

"I don't mean that London. You don't call it living in London, do you, to have a six-roomed house in a terrace in Ealing, to take a bus to the City, and work round Bermondsey and Tottenham and Shoreditch and the Bethnal Green Road, trying to sell ill-mannered and impossible people things they don't want to buy, and going home at night in an over-crowded bus pretty well tired out? You don't call that knowing London? Why," he went on, "I haven't been West, up Piccadilly Circus way, a dozen times in my life. I haven't ever been in a picture gallery in London. I went to the British Museum once when I was a boy."

"You're right as usual," his friend acknowledged. "Your London's worth knowing. It's beautiful, too, parts of it."

Despite his efforts, Peter Cradd found himself striving to draw the conversation back to Louise.

"Does your sister go abroad most winters?" he asked.

"She was at Cannes last season. Lady Cariswood has a villa there. Then she went on to Florence. The year before that she was all the winter in Florence. Yes, she generally gets away for a few months, sometimes longer."

"I suppose she speaks foreign languages?" Peter Cradd asked.

"Oh yes, she speaks them all right," the Vicar admitted. "Her grandmother—my grandfather married twice—was an Italian Marchesa, so she's got it in her blood. Didn't come out in me though.

They tried to teach me French and German at school, but it couldn't be done. I had to speak a bit of Italian once in my life, but that's pretty well gone now. Yet a lot of us east country people, you know, Cradd, have got Flemish blood. Our ancestors were Huguenots. I'm dark enough, but my grandfather was as black as a Spaniard. Louise has got a touch of that, too, of course. She's a queer girl. I wish she'd marry."

"I suppose she will some day," Peter Cradd said bravely.

The Vicar finished his whisky and soda with a gulp, and set the glass down on the flagstones by his side.

"I suppose so," he agreed, "but she's a long time making up her mind. . . . I must get on. Anything I can do for you, Cradd? Nurse looking after you all right, eh? Would you like to have Large up for a chat?"

"No, I don't think I want anything particularly, thank you," Peter Cradd reflected. "It's very good of you to come in and see me, Vicar. Come again when you have time. Large had better call up and get some money, and we can talk about a likely lad to take on."

"I'll send the fellow along to-morrow," George Barnslow promised, as he shook the tobacco ash from his clothes, "but keep yourself quiet, Cradd. Don't get seeing too many people. You've had a bit of a shock, remember, besides the broken arm. Hang it, I don't see why your geraniums do so much better than mine!"

He strode away—a great, black-coated figure, swinging his stick, his head a little thrown back as though to smell the sea, a man of open heart and manners—bucolic almost, and yet always leaving an impression of reservations, of certain wells of

feeling temporarily, if not hermetically, sealed. Peter Cradd found himself wondering in the lazy stir of the afternoon exactly what the man's attitude might be towards the religion which he kept so much in the background. The one sermon he had heard told him nothing. It was simply a shibboleth. He remembered the prayer-book he had glanced through in church. Did anyone really believe it all? Was there anything beyond to make up for the disappointments of this world, to help one regret a little less those forty-six past years? . . .

His nurse woke him from a somewhat depressed reverie.

"Your tea, Mr. Cradd," she announced, handing him the tray.

She helped him to sit up, and showed a disposition to linger, but he gave her no encouragement. At any moment, through this lazy, long afternoon, there was the hope that something might happen, and when it happened, he wanted to be alone. He lit his one precious cigarette, and lay with his head so far back that he could see through the leaves of an elm tree the blue sky above, could gather to his senses, singularly acute after his week's abstinence from tobacco and nearly all effort, the sweet and varied perfumes of the garden and the field beyond. To dream like this had its own peculiar pleasure. The sadness he felt was not real sadness. The ghost of things that never could be or have been possible had no power to sting or hurt. So he dreamed. When he opened his eyes it was because of the disturbance of a slight sound outside the garden gate, the skilful application of brakes by a practised chauffeur. He raised himself a little in his chair. The sun was shining upon the polish and silver of a great closed motor-car. A footman

with a cockade in his hat had thrown open the gate. The figure of his dreams, with a word to the man as she passed, came lightly across the lawn to him.

It really all seemed so easy and natural. She approached him with outstretched hands, with nothing of seriousness in her face, and just the suspicion of a gracious smile upon her lips. He had time to watch her as she came. She was wearing a lemon-coloured linen gown, a scarf waving back from her neck ; a small, mushroom-shaped hat of the same colour she had handed to the footman as she had passed through the gate.

" You nice man to be getting on so well ! " she exclaimed. " I heard you were coming down to-day, and I made them send me over."

He just said nothing at all. Her two hands clasped his one ; the other still helpless by his side. She looked at it pitifully.

" And to think," she continued, " that all that was to save my picture. Dear man, I hope it was worth while. If ever I can add just those last touches to it, if I can throw myself back into those few minutes, and feel all again, perhaps it will be. Then we'll go and look at it in the Academy together. What a pity one doesn't dedicate pictures ! Of course I would have to dedicate it to you."

The nurse came hurrying out with a chair. Louise settled down comfortably by his side.

" I am glad you came," he told her, as soon as they were alone. " I wanted you to come."

" I hoped you did," she rejoined. " I can only stay a few minutes, but those few minutes were a necessity. And now that I am here, you strange person," she went on, " I don't know how to talk to you."

"Why not?"

"Perhaps," she confessed, "because I don't know who you are or what you are, or how you came to have something which you have inside the body of Peter Cradd, and to have kept it there concealed for all these years. I don't know you, you see, as Mr. Peter Cradd at all. When you were with me on the island you were somebody else. When you stood up, you dear, brave little man, with your teeth clenched, and all your inexperience to make your task more difficult, fighting with that terrible storm, it seemed to me that I could see so many people, but never Mr. Peter Cradd."

He sighed.

"Tell me what I can do to escape from myself," he begged. "I'm sick of the fellow. Is there anyone you know with a personality to sell, any skin I can creep into, any human body I can steal, and with which I can start life again?"

She was silent for several moments. All the time she was frankly holding his hand, much to the disapproval of the nurse, who was looking out of the bedroom window.

"What could we do?" she wondered at last. "We could live in the world of make-belief, but then unfortunately no two people can live in a world alone. I think I shall write another unsuccessful novel about you, my impossible spark of humanity."

He made a little grimace.

"I'm not sure," he said, "that I like to be called a spark."

"What you will then—something human, something with a fire of living in it which has nothing to do with Mr. Peter Cradd, and nothing to do with his forty-six tiresome years. I've come to thank you. You were the sort of man a woman loves to

have near in a storm or in danger. Get well soon."

"You're not going?" he gasped.

She nodded.

"I'm going. I came to have just this glimpse of you, to say just the words to you I've said, to get just the look out of those nice blue eyes I've had. You see, words sometimes spoil things so."

She brushed his hand with her lips, rose and shook her skirts, and looked for a moment out seaward. It was her little 'leddyship' who spoke as she pointed with her long, thin forefinger.

"To think that that innocent little streak of silver should have dragged so much drama out of life," she reflected, "should have filled us even for those few minutes with all the passion of life and death! We touched the great things, dear Peter Cradd. Don't forget them too soon."

She was gone with a wave of the hand. He looked after her, speechless and incredulous. It seemed impossible. She had scarcely sat down for a moment, yet there was the footman at the gate, his hand to his hat. There was the open door, the respectful chauffeur, the flash of the sun upon the silver and polish, the gliding off of the car, and for one second the gleam of a white hand from the window. He lay so still upon the couch that his nurse left her place behind the curtain, and came down to see that all was well with her patient.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XIV

PETER CRADD came presently back to the full vigour of sunburnt health, of bronzed limbs, of swelling muscles. His arm healed wonderfully. Soon he was again at the tiller of his sailing-boat,

in the water, or swinging along in solitary tramps to the far Point, but always, for certain hours, every day he lay with a book amongst the sand-hills, with his face to the wind so that the tang of the sea was always near and about him. He developed an amazing capacity for reading. He learned the art of taking in the sense of thoughts without dallying with the words. Places, episodes, sometimes almost laboriously framed, passed before his eyes as quickly as in the brain of their creator. It was only when he came to the stylists, when he read Pater and Matthew Arnold, Symons and Le Gallienne, that he paused to linger with delight over the æsthetic beauty of the subtly concocted sentences, of the words chosen with that sense of poetry and exquisite fitness with which our own few masters have challenged the modern French and the ancient classics. He developed a catholicism of mind which amazed himself, and amazed Barnslow, who was sometimes his companion. He absorbed some of the doctrines of the modern philosophers and pseudo-philosophers, such as Carlyle and Wells, pondered about them, discounted them, and kept in his mind just what it chose to retain. From the first moment when books entered into his life, poetry took the first place in his fancy. He read backwards, in no sort of order, starting with Yeats, glorying in Browning and Matthew Arnold, intoxicating himself with Keats and Shelley, and, after brief glimpses beyond, adopting Shakespeare and Marlowe as his boundary. If the sun shone, there was a book in his pocket. If the rain fell—and there were rainy days—it was still there—the book in his pocket. The newspapers scarcely entertained him. The Vicar argued with him about this, but he only shook his head.

" Newspapers belong to the world of men and

women who are struggling," he propounded on one occasion. " The merest glance at one of them gives me a sense of unrest. Look at the advertisements—eager people wanting to buy or sell something, each striving to get the best of the bargain, pages of Stock Exchange prices for the money dealers and gamblers, all the sordid happenings of the police courts, whole pages exploiting the greatest farce in history—our idiotic politics. I've done my years of struggling. I don't want to buy, I don't want to sell, I don't want to worry myself about how other people live. All those thoughts and anxieties make for depression and ugliness. You can keep the daily papers, Barnslow."

" But a man ought to know what's going on in his own country," the Vicar thundered.

" I don't in the least see the necessity," Peter Cradd replied. " The world didn't care a damn about me when I was climbing round and round the wheel. Now I don't care a damn about the world."

" How in the world am I going to make a Christian out of you if you admit that you don't even care about your fellow-creatures ? " his friend demanded. " The time's coming when I've got to talk to you seriously. I suppose you realise this life isn't going to last for ever ? "

" I mean to make the best use of it whilst it does last," was the prompt rejoinder. " What harm am I doing in the world ? I read the Bible sometimes. As a matter of fact, I read it pretty often. I can't find anything there which tells me I'm doing any harm."

" Of course you're not," the Vicar agreed. " You're all right, Peter Cradd. All that's wanted is that you turn your face a little to the light, and realise why you're all right."

" Give me time," his companion begged. " This

religious business is just a little difficult for a man who has led my sort of life to grapple with. There are lots of things about it I might say—but I'd rather wait. Let me struggle on with living for a bit. Pull me up when you think I'm going the wrong way."

They were seated on a stile at the edge of a cornfield. Peter Cradd had walked over with his friend to make a call upon a parishioner.

" Well," the Vicar growled, " I saw you talking to that hussy Peggy Middleton yesterday."

" I never pass without speaking to her," was the calm rejoinder. " The poor girl's in trouble. I had nothing to do with her trouble, but I'm sorry for her."

" She's a wanton little hussy," Barnslow declared. " This is the second time."

" The more pity," Peter Cradd declared. " If it's the second time, she's probably all the more ashamed of herself, probably finds it all the more difficult to get any sympathy. If I'd known it was the second time, I daresay I should have been kinder to her than I was. By-the-by, I'm sending her to hospital next week."

George filled his pipe meditatively.

" I wonder whether you're right or wrong, Peter Cradd," he mused. " You make the way easy for the ill-doer."

" Have you ever sinned in your life ? "

The Vicar groaned.

" I have," he admitted. " Who hasn't ? "

" Have you ever suffered because you did ? "

" Of course I have."

" And so will she," Peter Cradd pointed out. " Don't you worry, Vicar. No need for us to go round with whips in our hands. I wasn't sure that I hadn't taken up a volume of Carlyle by mistake

when I came across a verse in the Bible the other day—' Be sure your sins will find you out.' That's philosophy as well as religion. That poor girl has either been through it or will go through it just according to her capacity for suffering. It isn't for us to play the persecutor."

" Hang it all," Barnslow demanded, " am I the Vicar of this Parish, or are you ? "

Peter Cradd grinned.

" Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings," he quoted . . .

They strolled on downhill to the edge of the marsh. Autumn was at hand now, and the twilight was already falling, although it was barely six o'clock. The lights were twinkling out from the snug farmhouses, and the fishing-boats, ghost-like shapes in the distance, were hurrying in down the estuary. There was smoke from most of the cottage chimneys. The hotel was partially shut up. Many of the boats had been dragged high and dry. Peter Cradd strained his eyes across the marsh. Just as far as he could see, there was the faint outline of Seagull's Island.

" I am going away to-morrow, Vicar," he announced suddenly.

" I've been expecting that. Where are you going ? "

" London, I think. You see, I've gone some way with the first stage of my education, thanks to you—and your sister. I've gone just far enough to know how hideously ignorant I am. I've learned a little about the country folk here, and I love them. I shall come back to them. I know they'll always count for a great deal in my life, but I'm going for a glimpse of the City."

" So it's to be London ? "

" I shall start with London."

"So soon—to-morrow," Barnslow muttered. "I'd ask you back to supper, Peter Cradd, but there's not a thing to eat in the house. I came home a day before I was expected.

"Come along with me," the other invited. "Mrs. Skidmore still thinks I need feeding up. If I order a chop, I get two. I've a faint idea there's something more even than that to-night. Come along, we'll have lots to eat, and a bottle of champagne. Does champagne keep, I wonder? I don't know. I bought two bottles one night, on the occasion when you came to brand me as a sinner, and we only drank one. Perhaps if we'd drunk the other one, Vicar—who knows?"

"You scoundrel!" his companion growled. "I'm glad you didn't drink it, anyway. We don't often get it here, and I don't know what you're talking about, in any case. I heard you order six dozen of the best you could get hold of in Norwich."

"Quite right," Peter Cradd assented humbly. "I'd forgotten about those, but this particular bottle will have a more piquant flavour."

"I never go to any dinner parties nowadays," Barnslow confided, as they swung along the lane. "I'm not like Louise. The County people have pretty well dropped me in despair. She likes to go everywhere; I don't. I can't understand the manners or talk of the new gentry. Can't see what they're up to, what they're looking for in life. Those Cariswood people—they're an old Norfolk family. They're fine shots, all of them, the men—I'll say that for them—but when they get a day's shooting, it's purple smoking suits, and talk! Well, you know I'm no sort of a prude, but the things those men and women say, I sometimes feel like dragging Louise out of it all. But there, it's no good. The moderns have got us by the throat.

They'll act as they will, do as they will. We've got to put up with it. I'm a yokel. You're a—well, God knows what you are, Peter Cradd! You're something that hasn't claimed itself yet, but anyhow, we're not of that world."

"Tell me," Peter Cradd asked, "where is your sister?"

"In London, I believe, with old Lady Durcott. I wish to goodness she'd marry Arthur. The poor man worries me to death when she's away. I saw his car go by filled with luggage this morning, so I expect he's off after her. He'd have a lot more chance if he kept away. A girl like Louise—well"—the Vicar broke off—"she's difficult to deal with, that's all. I say, your chrysanthemums look well."

Mrs. Skidmore made them welcome. It was always a comfort to her to have the respectability of her master vouched for by the Vicar's presence. The little dining-room, with its oak table, its deep green walls hung with sporting prints, its wood fire, the worn, comfortable chairs, looked at its best. Peter Cradd, who was becoming an expert, mixed some cocktails.

"Woman's drink!" Barnslow declared, as he tossed off a couple. "Confound it! Did you find that bottle of champagne?"

His host held it up.

"Cliquot 1911," he announced. "Any good?"

"I'll show you what I think of it presently," was the cordial reply. "Port's the only wine I know anything about, though, Cradd. I seldom touch anything during the day but beer, but my couple of glasses of port at night are pretty regular."

"Horrors, I don't believe I've got any!"

"Yes, you have, my lad, although you may not know it," the Vicar assured him. "You've never

asked for the key of the cellar, and I've never given it to you. Here it is, on my watchchain. Now, if you like, I'll go down and decant you a bottle of port such as you've never tasted before in your life. I don't suppose you know the difference between wood port and vintage port, do you?"

"No idea," Peter Cradd confessed. "There's another sort, isn't there, called 'Tawny'?"

"And that's the man I'm trying to make into a Christian!" the Vicar groaned.

"So this is really your last night, my neighbour," George Barnslow observed, as the two men sat in easy-chairs drawn up to the fire, with their bottle of port upon a small table between them. "I'm inclined to think," he continued, holding up his glass appreciatively to the light, "that this trip of yours to London, Cradd, is after all a silly business."

"I'm sorry to hear that," was the quiet response.

"What are you going for?" Barnslow demanded bluntly. "You don't know."

"In a way I know. Of course, I'm living still in a fog, but I do know that although this life down here is a very exquisite portion of a whole, it isn't the whole. I must find out something about the other part."

"Don't be too greedy, my lad," his guest enjoined. "I went too far afield once, and I got it in the neck for it. You're only one man, you know, Cradd—not a dozen. You can only lead the life of one man. What do you think London has for you, or any other of the big cities, for that matter? You're lost there—a mite in a cheese. Stay here, and they may ask you to go on the Parish Council next year!"

"I should be none the worse Parish Councillor for knowing a little of what lies west of the Strand."

"There isn't much that's good, I can tell you that," Barnslow assured him gloomily. "There are a few hundred thousand lazy, loafing, animal parasites, a few hundred thousand greedy human beings, all sucking one another's blood for what they'd be better without, and as for the world of politics—well, I'd sooner walk a mile any time than have to talk to a Cabinet Minister. I'd be so anxious all the time to tell him what I thought of the charlatan legislation of this misguided country."

Peter Cradd was enjoying his port very much. He had never tasted anything quite like it before, and he was beginning to feel genial.

"I don't think you like London, Mr. Barnslow," he ventured with a twinkle in his eyes.

"A festering ant heap!" was the bitter reply. "Never mind, take your stick and pick it about if you must. I'll tell you this, though. You may find out a good deal you'd be happier never to know."

Peter Cradd sighed.

"I hate to think that life is like that," he admitted.

"That's because, notwithstanding the beast of a time you've had, you're a howling optimist. You believe in good, because you like good better than evil. Makes a happier man of you, perhaps, but it's laying up a store of trouble if you get too inquisitive. Never mind, stir the heap up, if you must. Maybe Louise will lend you a hand, if she hasn't sprung some new fad. Perhaps you'll come across my wife there?"

"Your wife?" Peter Cradd gasped. "I had no idea that you were married."

"Oh yes, I was married years ago. Married an Italian girl. She'd had enough of me and this

country and my life in less than two years. She's singing in grand opera now somewhere, I think."

"I'm sorry," Peter Cradd murmured, a little awkwardly.

"Wonder no one told you before," Barnslow went on, pouring himself out a third glass of port. "I'm human like the rest, you see. I've known what it is to have a woman round the house, and to go through hell when you lose her. You haven't had to face that, Peter Cradd, and I hope you never will—the half-sentimental, half-passionate sort of desire to have a woman you've loved, and still love, back again round the place, with her perfumes and tricks and follies and glories. I get those hours sometimes. I have to groan them away. Sometimes—but we'll let that go. Keep your mind off women, Peter Cradd, unless you're ever free to marry again, and then be careful . . . That was a fine bottle of 'seventy. I shall now smoke a pipe, and swing off home."

The Vicar was as good as his word. His departure indeed was almost abrupt, and his host had a curious feeling that it would not be well to try to detain him.

At nine o'clock the next morning, with his luggage behind, his chauffeur by his side, and a certain feeling of adventure stirring his pulses, Peter Cradd drove his car through the village, and followed the great signpost which said—"To London."

THE END—BOOK I

SIMPLE PETER CRADD — CHAPTER XV

IT had always been rather a difficult task to provide what might be described as suitable employment for Mr. Reginald Spearmain, the youngest and most ornamental member of the great firm of Spearmain, Armitage & Spearmain. The visit to the office of Mr. Peter Cradd, however, on the morning after his arrival in London, and his exposition of his desires, did something to solve the problem. Sartorially, socially, and in all his comings and goings, Peter Cradd became that young man's charge. It was a task commenced with a certain amount of diffidence, but continued with enthusiasm. Reginald at times gave account of his progress to his father.

"Dad," he confided, after the first fortnight, "we've got some queer clients—regular zoo of them, in fact—and when you first gave me the job of breaking in Mr. Peter Cradd, I thought you'd got me bothered. I tell you, though, the little man's game for anything. You ought to see him. He's wearing the right sort of clothes, and looks quite all right in them, and, although at first he seemed such a queer sort, he's got a kind of way with him. I don't know what it is, but it carries him through wherever he goes. I wouldn't mind taking him anywhere. He's a good piece of work—that's what Mr. Peter Cradd is."

"You interest me," his father declared. "You interest me exceedingly. I must confess that when I first saw him, I scarcely looked upon him as likely to be a social success."

" Fellow's got a way with him," Mr. Reginald Spearmain repeated. " He don't talk much, but he never says the wrong thing. Sensibility, I suppose they'd call it. That's what he's got. I'd make quite a social success of him, but he spends half his time in picture galleries."

" A very admirable taste," Mr. Spearmain senior observed.

" He's not a great chap for the lassies," Reginald continued. " I've introduced him to a few of the regulars at Ciro's, and we've run up against one or two on our own when we've been trotting round. He's very polite—generous and all that—but that seems to be about as far as he goes."

" And quite far enough, too," Mr. Spearmain said severely. " I wish that your own principles, Reginald, were equally correct. Still, what you say about Mr. Cradd interests me. You know that he has a wife ? "

Reginald nodded. In his world wives didn't count for very much.

" She is a person with whom he would certainly never be able to live again. Within the course of these few months even he has managed to make a different person of himself. Still, one is forced to remember that he is only in the prime of life. One wonders, naturally—one wonders."

" I expect I'll pick the right sort of fairy for him some day," Reginald declared hopefully. " We're going to have a little hop to-night at Ciro's. I've invited Eula Tregenti and Maisie Fairburn. It was hard work at first to get him to dance," he went on, " but he's quite decent at it now. I'm afraid I'll have to have another cheque, dad."

His father made no comment. The management of Mr. Cradd's investments was quite a profitable affair for the firm, and their client himself had

expressed a desire that all expenses connected with the youngest member of the firm's services should appear in his account.

" Who are these young ladies of whom you speak, Reginald ? "

" Well, Eula Tregenti's a singer, and Maisie Fairburn—she was on the stage once, but she doesn't do much at it now."

" I trust," Matthew Spearmain enjoined, " that you exercise a certain amount of discretion in the selection of the people to whom you introduce our friend."

" Wouldn't be any good if I didn't," the young man replied. " He's got ideas of his own, I can tell you. He doesn't like the high kickers. We were with a party where some of the ladies got a little gay one night not long ago, and he wasn't having any at all—left early. I called round the next morning, and he rather laid it across me. Doesn't like young ladies who've had the odd one at all."

" I respect Mr. Cradd for his principles," the lawyer said approvingly. " Amusement is all very well, and he certainly has a right, as practically a single man, to any amount of that, especially considering that he devotes a great deal of his time, according to you, to other pursuits. All the same, I am glad to hear he has no liking for the class of young person you describe."

" Puts the kibosh on the gay kitties all right," Reginald assented.

" And how about the Club ? "

" It's a cert," was the confident reply. " I saw Mr. Raynham yesterday, and he actually stopped and congratulated me upon my candidate, or rather ours. 'Very pleasant, quiet manners,' he said. 'Just the sort of member that we like to have.'"

Matthew Spearmain smiled. He felt that he was indeed doing well by his valuable client. He had already made him as other men of the London world. His investments were increasing in value, and he would, in a few days, become a member of a very pleasant and almost exclusive club of excellent repute.

"The most valuable client our New Zealand agents have ever sent us," he remarked to his son.

"I tell you another thing, sir," the latter replied, as he glanced at his watch and rose. "I've been around with him a good deal, you know, and I think I'm something of a judge—he's generous, but he doesn't fling his money about. He's quiet—almost too quiet with women—but it's my opinion he's a damned good sort."

Matthew Spearmain coughed.

"A little less vigorously expressed, my dear Reginald," he agreed, "and that would be my own conviction."

Peter Cradd met his youthful cicerone that night in Ciro's bar, where they took a pleasant cocktail together before the arrival of their lady guests. Reginald viewed his companion with the satisfaction of the artist. His handiwork had been good. His clothes fitted excellently, his jewellery was in the best possible taste, his evening tie was arranged with just that little flair which makes the difference. Everything about him was as it should be. In appearance, too, Peter Cradd was another being to the man who had tramped the streets of Bermondsey in the days of his slavery. His sunburn became him, his features seemed to have gained in distinction, his eyes were clear, his smile more frequent. Reginald had never been a snob, and he had faced his task without flinching, but it was

certainly more agreeable to take round a man who had every appearance of belonging to the same civilised world.

"Here they are," he exclaimed, rising and advancing a step or two with outstretched hands. "Awfully good of you to come, Maisie, and I'm so glad to meet you again, Madame."

They shook hands. He turned to Peter.

"I want to introduce my friend Mr. Peter Cradd," he said. "Miss Maisie Fairburn, and Madame Tregenti."

They shook hands, and cocktails were ordered. Miss Maisie Fairburn was a perfect type of the modern young lady who has been on the stage, and occasionally ventures there again upon the opportunity arising. She was tall, slight, *soignée*, and extremely correct in manners and speech. Her companion was a little shorter, but even more elegant. She wore black, with white coral ornaments, her skin was almost of ivory pallor, and her dark eyes were extraordinarily expressive. She wore her hair parted in the middle, and brushed closely down at the sides, and Peter Cradd was not in the least surprised when she spoke with a slight Italian accent. Conversation proceeded along the ordinary channel of banalities. One cocktail was all the two young ladies would take, and they presently trooped upstairs to the table where Reginald, at the firm's expense, had ordered a very excellent dinner.

"This may not be the smartest place in London," Maisie Fairburn remarked, settling herself in her place, "but it certainly is the most comfortable. I would rather dine and dance here than anywhere. Wouldn't you, Eula?"

"I think indeed I would," the other replied. "I do not like crushes, especially when one has

pleasant companions," she added, with an inciting little smile at Mr. Cradd. "One prefers to talk sometimes."

"I am very pleased to hear it," Peter Cradd assured her fervently, "for I am a very bad dancer."

"Must I believe that?" she queried.

"Well, I never danced a step until two months ago."

"Not even the old-fashioned dances?" Maisie Fairburn asked.

"Not even the old-fashioned dances," he confessed. "My younger days were a little strenuous. I had no time for dancing."

"I love to hear of men who have worked hard and made a success of life," Maisie murmured.

"Alas, then," Peter Cradd replied, with a smile, "I have no story to tell you, because, although I worked terribly hard all my life, I made no success. In fact," he added meditatively, "I suppose I ought to write myself down a failure. I had confidential information, only a week or two before the change came in my fortunes, that the firm who were employing me as a commercial traveller were thinking of dismissing me."

"This change in your fortunes then?" she asked. "It was not that you made a great deal of money?"

"Alas, no!" he admitted. "A distant cousin made it for me. He unfortunately died, and had the good taste to leave the results of his labours to me."

"And jolly good results too," Reginald interposed. "Wish I'd had a cousin in New Zealand. I shouldn't go grinding down to Lincoln's Inn every day."

"What fun to have a fortune left to you!"

Maisie sighed. "Money is so hard to earn nowadays."

Reginald coughed. He met Eula's eyes, and they laughed. Maisie continued with her caviare quite unembarrassed.

"I find it easy enough," Peter Cradd said, smiling. "You should invest your money with the firm of Spearmain, Armitage and Spearmain, and you would find your balance grow almost as fast as you spend the interest."

"Oh, Mr. Reginald, of course!" Eula exclaimed, laughing at him. "I always said that you had brains, Reginald. No one else believes it, but I do."

The young man dropped his eyeglass, and looked at her severely.

"What do you mean—'no one else believes it'?" he demanded. "Ask Maisie here. I've done one or two wonderful strokes of business for her. I am considered in the office rather a brainy fellow."

So they chattered on, and Peter Cradd joined in, and listened, and wondered, and thought a little, and speculated a little, and on the whole was rather amused. The violinist played wonderful music to them, and presently they all danced—Peter Cradd very diffidently at first, but more confidently after he had been encouraged by the approbation of his partners.

"For my part," Eula told him, "I love your quiet style of dancing. I do not like to go tearing across the room, up and down, and having to trust so much to my partner. Dancing is not gymnastics, after all. Do you know what I think about it?"

"Do tell me," he begged.

"I like it because it is just a chance to float about the room, and listen to the music, and to be alone with someone for a minute or two instead of

being one of a party. I sometimes think, don't you, Mr. Cradd, that a party of four is not very satisfactory. A tête-à-tête is impossible, and general conversation is difficult. Now you and I are quite alone, and we can say just what we like to one another. If we had anything to say it would be so much easier, would it not ?"

"It would indeed," Peter Cradd assented. "Please tell me all about yourself. You see now I know nothing but your name, and you—you know nothing about me except that I was a poor workman who became suddenly rich."

"For a *nouveau riche*," she remarked, a little drily, "you're a wonderfully apt product."

"Entirely due to Reggie," he explained—"Mr. Reginald Spearmain, I mean. His father is my lawyer. When I came up from the country a short time ago, I went to him, and I said, 'I would like to know something about London and London life. How am I to go about it ?' He looked at me doubtfully. I was wearing a suit of clothes I had bought in a country town. I believe, I have been told since, that it is not the custom to wear a tweed cap in London. I believe, too, that I was guilty of the enormity of a flannel shirt—in fact, so far as I remember, my tie, which was harmless, was the only thing which passed muster. So my lawyer, Reggie's father, looked at me and coughed. 'Well, well,' he said, 'you have set me a problem.' 'Isn't that what lawyers are for,' I enquired, 'to solve problems ?' Then he coughed again, and thought for a little time, and finally he asked me where I was staying, and said that he would send his son to call upon me, who might be more helpful, as he belonged to the new generation. So the next day Reggie was announced. 'Want to see something of the giddy world up here, I un-

derstand,' he began, when he had settled himself down in my easy-chair, was smoking one of my cigarettes, and had accepted with enthusiasm the suggestion of an early cocktail. 'That was rather my idea,' I told him. He looked me up and down. Then he coughed, just like his father. 'Do you happen to have a London tailor?' he asked me. And then I sat down, and, Madame—dear me, how stupid, Madame Tr——"

"Oh, Eula," she begged—"Eula, please."

"Eula," he went on, "I sat down and I laughed until the tears came into my eyes. I said to him, 'Mr. Reginald Spearmain, I appreciate very much your coming to see me. I am a more or less valuable client to your firm. Your father knows what I want. I think you have been told off to see that I have the chance of getting it. Is that true?' 'Gad, you're right!' he exclaimed. 'Very well,' I told him, 'let the firm charge up your time to me. I want a tailor, a bootmaker, a hosier. I want to know how to wear the things I buy. I want to know the best restaurants, and so on, and so on, and so on.' Thus I was adopted by Mr. Reginald Spearmain. We don't allude to it, of course. We go about as ordinary companions, but sometimes—with anyone like you, for instance, who I know has a sense of humour—I cannot help being confidential."

The music paused, and whilst they waited for the encore, Eula wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes.

"Mr. Cradd," she confided, "I think I like you very nearly better than any man I have ever met in my life."

"Eula," he replied boldly, "if I can win your liking by just telling you the truth, I shall become——"

"Well?" she whispered.

"Your very dear friend."

The music started again, and they recommenced. After that, Reggie certainly had his wish, for Eula showed no desire to dance with anyone else but her present partner. Maisie Fairburn was indeed a little peevish about it. One dance she refused altogether, and lectured her companion.

"I like you, Reggie!" she complained. "You invite me out to meet a millionaire, and you hand him over body and soul, goods and chattels, to Eula. Why mayn't I have a look in?"

"Too late, my dear," he sighed. "Eula's got him all tied up, goods delivered, receipt given, and all that sort of thing. I know Eula. She's difficult, but when she looks up at a man's face like that it's the beginning of the end of things. Besides, there's nothing doing with her just now, is there—no engagement?"

Maisie shook her head.

"Eula takes herself too seriously," she replied. "She asks too high a salary, and, after all, on the stage she hasn't such a wonderful appearance. It's just at a time like this that she is at her best. Lucky girl!"

"I say, Maisie!" he protested.

"It's a hard world," the young lady insisted. "Millionaires are scarce, and I think you ought to have given me my chance, Reggie. I am always awfully nice to you."

"Let's have another liqueur and a dance, old thing," he begged. "Then we'll go on if you like to the Florida. We needn't bother about them."

"We certainly need," Miss Maisie Fairburn objected. "We'll take them with us wherever we go. I haven't given up hope at all. I've got a trick of looking serious. I haven't had a chance of

trying it on him yet. Eula isn't going to have it all her own way, I can tell you."

Reginald watched the liqueurs being poured out gloomily.

" If ever I become really jealous," he threatened, " there's no telling what might happen. Can't take up the papers nowadays but there's some story of thwarted love and tragic revenge."

She laughed softly.

" You won't quarrel with Mr. Cradd," she said, " because, after all, for a gay young man, Reggie, your head is very well screwed on. You wouldn't quarrel with a valuable client."

" If anyone came between me and the girl I loved," he began——

She rose abruptly.

" I'd rather dance," she decided.

It was a very pleasant party. They moved on to the Florida, and there Maisie insisted upon what she called ' her chance.' She took Peter Cradd off to dance, and, finding the room crowded, she showed him the new bar.

" Of course," she confided, " I'm feeling terribly hurt."

" Why ? " he asked, a little startled.

" I was asked here to-night purposely to meet you. We've danced together once."

" Well, I rather thought," Peter Cradd began hesitatingly——

" Oh, you listened to that silly boy Reggie," she interrupted. " He always has some girl he thinks he's madly in love with, and, being very young indeed, he naturally believes—everything he shouldn't believe. Reggie is nothing more to me than any other young man I meet going about. As a matter of fact," she went on earnestly, " I am not very fond of young men."

"No?" he ventured politely.

"I like men who have seen something of life in whatever sphere, who have had to work and been up against it, and known disappointments and trouble. I think that makes for character, don't you, Mr. Cradd?"

"I suppose it does," he admitted.

"I think your story is so romantic," she continued. "I wish you would tell me some more about it, Mr. Cradd. Do you think if we called that barman he'd give us just one little drink?"

"We'll try him, at any rate," he assented.

The barman proved amenable, and drinks were brought. Maisie leaned back in her chair with an air of complete content.

"Tell me some more about your life, please," she begged. "Talk to me about yourself. If you only knew how wearisome it is for a girl to hear these boys talk all the time, of their polo, their tennis, their cricket, and where to get the right-shaped collars, you would realise what a treat it is to be with someone who has other interests in life."

"But I haven't anything to talk about," Peter Cradd assured her. "For twenty-five years or so I was a commercial traveller carrying a little bag around, you know, and selling things to people who usually didn't want to buy them, and were sorry afterwards when they had."

She shook with laughter, and wiped imaginary tears from her eyes.

"How funny you are!" she declared. "Do go on! I love being amused."

"After that my fortune came. I went down to the country, learned to sail a boat, to row and to fish, bought a little house and lay in the sunshine as long as there was any. Then I came up here, and Reggie, who is my lawyer's son, is showing me

a little of London life. Half the time, I admit, I spend in picture galleries, and I still go on with a little reading. Otherwise—there you are! What is there to tell you? I'm one of the dullest people."

"Tell me where you go to see the pictures?" she begged. "I adore them, only I never find anyone who will take me anywhere. I want to go to the—what do they call it?—oh, I know, the Tate Gallery, and then there's the National Museum."

"National Gallery," he corrected her.

"Of course. How I would love to do those places. But you see a girl can't go about alone, Mr. Cradd. It is so awkward in London, and those artists stare at one so."

"I thought nowadays," he said, "you young ladies went everywhere alone."

"Some girls do, perhaps," Maisie assented. "I don't know why, but I was never like that. My people were very strict indeed. My father was a professional man and had always to be very careful. When I went on the stage it nearly broke my mother's heart, but I had to go, you know, Mr. Cradd. We were, oh, so poor, and I felt I must earn money for them somehow or other, and there didn't seem to be anything else I could do."

"I think it was splendid of you," he murmured, with a little of something which might have been real enthusiasm in his tone.

Then, just at that moment, things went wrong. Reggie and Eula appeared in the doorway, discovered them, and approached.

"Been looking for you everywhere," Reggie declared reprovingly.

"What a very long time you have been," Eula complained to Peter Cradd.

"Considering it is the first time I've had a chance to say a word to Mr. Cradd," Maisie rejoined tartly,

" I think you needn't have worried about us. You asked me to meet Mr. Cradd, you know, Reggie," she went on. " When you do have an interesting friend——"

" I was asked to meet Mr. Cradd, too," Eula interrupted a little piteously, " and for half an hour I have seen nothing of him at all. Only the last time we danced he told me that his favourite tune was ' Love Tales ' ; and listen, Mr. Cradd."

He rose to his feet at once. It was, after all, mere politeness. They danced through the doorway, and out on to the glass floor.

" Let's see if we can get a drink," Reggie proposed.

" I've had all I want, thank you," Maisie replied haughtily. " I think, as soon as the others have finished that dance that Eula dragged Mr. Cradd off to, I should like to go home."

PETER CRADD had lately invested, on Reggie's advice, in a limousine car for night work which easily held four, so there was no excuse for anything in the shape of a division on their homeward journey. Neither was there any denying the fact that Eula, who lived in Kensington, was a great deal farther away than Maisie, who shared a flat with a girl in Half Moon Street. So, unconscious of the somewhat tense situation, Peter Cradd collected addresses, gave them to the chauffeur, and took his place on the back seat with his young friend.

" I don't know where you want to go to, Reggie," he said. " I've told the man to drop Miss Fairburn. Then, if you like, we'll see Miss Eula home."

" Excellent idea," Maisie remarked sarcastically.

"A little drive down to Kensington will do you good, Reggie."

"Maybe," that young man replied, "but I'm not going. You don't want a chaperon, do you, Eula?"

"I do not know Mr. Cradd well enough," she said, smiling up at him, "to know whether I ought to have one or not, but I think I shall risk it."

"There you are then," Reggie remarked contentedly, lighting a cigarette. "I shall come in and cadge a whisky and soda from you, Maisie."

"It's far too late," she objected tartly. "You know how particular I have to be in my flat. I never have gentlemen visitors at this time of night."

Reggie blew out his match reflectively.

"That's a new order of things, isn't it?"

"Hateful person! I don't know what's the matter with you to-night, Reggie. You've been trying to make yourself disagreeable all the time. I don't think I like you any more. Please get out at Half Moon Street, and take a taxi home."

"Perhaps," he suggested, "you'd like a little fresh air yourself. Drive down with Eula and Mr. Cradd, and Mr. Cradd could bring you home, eh?"

Maisie did her best to get in a sidelong glance at her *vis-à-vis*, but failed.

"I shouldn't think of inflicting my company upon anyone," she said. "Here we are in Half Moon Street."

"Don't be a goose," Reggie enjoined, taking her arm. "You're going to give me that whisky and soda and be nice about it, you know you are."

Peter Cradd was showing no signs whatever of emotion at the prospect of his drive to Kensington, and after all there were other evenings. She had found out his address. There was the telephone,

and that suggestion of the picture galleries might be revived. Maisie put the best face on things.

" Well, I suppose you must have your whisky and soda, silly boy ! " she conceded. " It's horribly late though. Good-bye, you people. What a blessing it is that we girls don't kiss since salve came in," she added, as a last shaft, glancing at Eula's lips.

" I do not like to be kissed by my own sex at any time," Eula rejoined sweetly. " I would even use salve to protect me if it were necessary. But—see ! " she rubbed her lips, and displayed her fingers to her companion.

Maisie abandoned the contest, and, followed by her cavalier, stepped out with a farewell wave of the hand.

" I cannot tell why," Eula observed as she leaned back amongst the cushions, and looked hopefully up at her host, " but Maisie is not quite at her best to-night. I think she is usually a good-tempered girl. Are you to blame, Mr. Cradd ? Have you not, perhaps, said quite as many nice things as you ought to have done, or have you said too many ? "

" Well," Peter Cradd pointed out good-humouredly, " I understood she was Reggie's particular friend. And you have been so kind and forebearing with me, and my poor dancing, that naturally I did not—to tell you the truth—I did not think of her. We had a talk in the bar. It seems that she is very fond of pictures."

" Pictures ! " Eula scoffed. " She does not know a picture from an oleograph."

The car swung into Piccadilly. Suddenly Peter Cradd was aware that a small, cool, and very pleasant-feeling hand was seeking for his, found it, and rested there.

" Is that stupid ? " she asked softly.

" I like it—sometimes."

" So we drive home together like this ? You are content ? "

He avoided the greater gallantry.

" Perfectly," he answered. " I wish the journey was a great deal longer."

She drew a little closer to him.

" It has been a very pleasant evening," she murmured. " Shall we go out again together soon, yes ? "

" I should enjoy it immensely," he assured her.

" With Maisie and Reggie ? "

" Of course."

Eula was thoughtful for a minute or two. She looked out into the velvet gloom—electric standards like harbour lights in a pool of darkness. Peter Cradd's chauffeur had a turn for speed, and Kensington was after all not so very far away. Then she had a wonderful idea.

" Mr. Cradd," she ventured, " you say that you are fond of pictures. I am invited to a private view to-morrow—just the works of an Italian artist whom I know. Will you take me ? "

" With the greatest pleasure," he assented. " What time ? "

" The show opens at three o'clock."

" Then naturally we lunch first," hospitable Peter Cradd insisted. " I have two appointments in the morning," he reflected. " May I send the car for you at any time—well, shall we say one o'clock ? Then you can be at Ciro's at a quarter past."

" That would be very pleasant," she agreed. " Oh, how near we are getting ! Your chauffeur drives so fast, Mr. Cradd."

" Are you nervous ? " he asked. " Would you like me to tell him to go more slowly ? "

She smiled a little derisively.

"You do not understand us Italians," she said. "It is not speed in motor-cars that makes us nervous."

Peter Cradd again missed his cue. Those delightfully soft fingers twined in his pressed his hand a little. He returned the pressure. Then the car swung to.

"We are arrived," she sighed, "and I thought always that it was a very long way."

The chauffeur held open the door. Mr. Cradd descended. He escorted his companion across the pavement. Very dainty and sweet she seemed in her black evening coat, with its chinchilla collar nestling around her face. At the door she held out her hand.

"Mr. Cradd," she said, "I cannot ask you in like Maisie for a whisky and soda, because I do not keep those things, and though I have lived here for nearly a year quite alone, I have never asked a man friend to come in with me, especially so late. What do you think? Perhaps no? Perhaps yes?"

"I would not dream of intruding," he assured her. "It is sweet of you to allow me to see you home. I shall send the car at one o'clock, and I shall be waiting for you at Ciro's when you come."

She drew her fingers away from his slowly, perhaps a little regretfully. He waited bareheaded whilst she opened the door and passed inside. Then he stepped back into the car, made himself thoroughly comfortable amongst the cushions, and lighted a cigarette. Unlike some other evenings spent with Reggie, he had enjoyed this one and appreciated his companions. His brain was slightly in a whirl. He was discovering in himself lately at odd times the instincts of the philanderer. He was not quite sure whether that closed door was a relief or a disappointment to him.

At half-past ten the next morning, Peter Cradd was seated in the offices of Messrs. Spearmain, Armitage & Spearmain, signing transfers and transacting other business in connection with his estates. Things were going well with his soberly chosen investments, and the head of the firm pointed out with justifiable satisfaction the increasing value of some of his holdings.

"I only wish, Mr. Cradd," he said gravely, "that your people—your wife and her representative—were showing equal discretion in the handling of their money. I was obliged only the day before yesterday on your wife's instructions, to part with twenty thousand pounds to a Mr. Bloxom, a person in whom I have but little confidence, for investment in a bookmaking business."

Peter Cradd whistled softly.

"I had no idea," he murmured, "that Harriet was that sort of a fool."

"I am keeping the accounts in the strictest possible fashion," Mr. Spearmain continued, "because I feel that sooner or later there will be trouble. Beyond a half of your estate, which is definitely transferred to your family, however, no further claims can be levied upon you. I have made that clear legally, but I must say that if you have any influence with your people, I think it is your duty to use it to keep them from these rash speculations."

"What, have the others been having a plunge too?"

"They have indeed. Your two sons, George and Henry, have apparently walked into a shop in Bond Street, and given fifteen thousand pounds for a motor business which they know nothing about. I look upon that sum as entirely ill-spent, and

furthermore, from what I have seen of the young men, I should not consider them capable of running any business of any sort."

" I quite agree with you," their father assented. " In their way, I think they are two of the biggest fools I ever knew. Well, remember that something of this has always been at the back of my mind. You have placed that forty thousand pounds to a reserve fund, never to be touched ? "

" I have done so," the lawyer replied, " and more than ever I appreciate your wisdom in making that provision. They will always have the interest of that to live upon, and even at the worst I don't suppose they can disperse the whole of their remaining capital. Still, they are badly in need of more restraint and better advisers."

" I will write them," Peter Cradd promised. " It will not be a pleasant task, but I will write. By-the-by, where is Reggie this morning ? "

Mr. Spearmain coughed.

" So far as I have been able to ascertain," he said, " he has not yet appeared. I understood that he was spending yesterday evening with you."

" Quite so," Peter Cradd acknowledged. " We were perhaps a little late."

" A telephone message arrived from him a few minutes ago," his father confided, " inviting you to lunch with him, in case you had left before he arrived. The Embassy, I think he said, at one-thirty."

Peter Cradd picked up his hat and stick.

" Tell him, please, that I will see him later in the day," he begged. " I have a luncheon engagement."

Eula was barely five minutes late. Again she was dressed in black, but with a quiet perfection of

detail which appealed immensely to her expectant host. The lace around her throat was a wonderful foil to her clear, pale complexion.

" I have not kept you waiting ? " she asked, as she passed through the swing doors into the little reception hall.

" Not a minute," he assured her.

They descended the stairs, ordered cocktails, and sat in a comfortable corner of the bar whilst a *maître d'hôtel*, who was beginning to understand that in Peter Cradd he had a client worth cultivating, brought them a menu and discoursed upon the possibilities of luncheon. They gave their order, and Eula lit a cigarette.

" I cannot tell you," she confided, " how pleasant it was to feel, when I woke this morning, that I had something to look forward to. You know, I find London rather a lonely place, Mr. Cradd."

" But you must have plenty of friends ? "

" Very few," she assured him. " I would rather be alone than with unsympathetic companions. There are indeed," she went on, as she fitted her cigarette into a long holder of white ivory, " few people so lonely as I am. Maisie, for instance, has a girl living with her, and she has a great many friends. Her flat is never empty night or day. That would not please me at all. I like quietude. I like books and comfort, and just one person perhaps—that, oh—oh, so impossible one person ! "

Peter Cradd ordered another cocktail.

" Sleep well ? " he enquired.

She started. Apparently her thoughts had wandered away to dreams conjured up by her little confession.

" Not at all," she answered. " I was awake for hours, almost until it was daylight. Yet I had such a wonderful evening."

" Cheery little party, wasn't it ? " he observed uneasily.

" It was more than that," she murmured.

The *maître d'hôtel* announced their luncheon, and escorted them to the corner table which Peter Cradd had reserved. Even the latter, who seldom noticed such things, could scarcely fail to observe the interest and admiration which his companion's entrance excited. The manager of the club, who happened to be down in the Grill Room for a few minutes, hurried over to pay his respects. Several of the men lunching in different parts of the room rose and bowed. The women stared at them, and discussed her critically amongst themselves, a compliment quite as sincere as any she could have been paid. She ate delicately, drank sparingly, and talked in well-chosen phrases, with just the little vibrant touch of intimacy which he found more and more attractive.

" You make me very astonished, Mr. Cradd," she confided, as they reached the coffee stage, and their conversation became perhaps a shade more personal, " you make me very astonished that you have so great a gift of sympathy, because I do not find English people so very sympathetic, and from you it flows. All the time with you I am content. Mr. Peter Cradd, you will not go away and leave me quite all alone, will you ? "

" Of course not," he assured her. " I am here for another two months. What I may do then, I do not know," he went on. " I may go to the Riviera. I may go to Italy."

She half closed her eyes.

" To Italy," she murmured.

" And you ? "

" I must get an engagement here. I would sooner live on a crust in Italy, but I have my

family, who have spent a great deal of money upon my training, to consider. I must earn for them. So I stay here, but if there are many more of these fogs, I think it will be all finished with me. I shall not sing. I shall not dance, I shall not live. Already, alas! my voice has suffered. I have terrible fears sometimes that it may go altogether."

"Our climate is pretty bad in winter," he admitted.

"I think," she suggested, "that you engage me as your companion, Mr. Cradd. We go to Italy together, yes? You do not speak the language—it is my own. You do not know the picture galleries—I know them blindfold. You do not know where to go to find the unknown treasures—but I do. I think I will be a very good guide for you."

He smiled at her. For a single moment there came a vision of all the things which lay within his grasp, which other men looked for and accepted as a matter of course. He was beginning to understand what it all meant. Women—all women, it seemed to him—needed protection, someone to lean on, pleasantly, kindly, trustingly. The one fear they appeared to have was solitude. And the whole thing was so easy, so universal, so much a recognised part of the great scheme of everyday life, yet for him, he realised, with that lightning-like vision of the storm and Seagull's Island, the memory of that magical sweetness which had seemed during those few seconds of her graciousness to have made him a king amongst men, so impossible. For a moment there was an insurgent wave of anger all through his body. Why should all these joyous possibilities be spoilt by that strange internal abhorrence of anything which might be counted to him in the world of fancy as in-

fidelity? She leaned towards him. Her fingers touched his wrist.

"You do not pay me a great compliment," she complained. "Your thoughts have gone—vanished. It is your body which sits here, but the rest of you—where? I cannot hold you, not for these few moments."

He made a great effort.

"It is you yourself," he confided, "who put the thoughts into my mind."

"Then I forgive," she whispered . . .

He paid the bill, and they drove to a picture gallery in Bond Street. One by one, they studied the productions of an Italian futurist of whom great things were anticipated. Eula was sometimes thoughtful. Peter Cradd, on the other hand, was never interested. He listened to the explanations she occasionally attempted, but frankly confessed that the whole thing was beyond him.

"I can understand allegory," he said, "I can permit myself even to find pleasure in looking at something which could scarcely possibly exist except in the imagination. I do not wish to look, as you say, at photographs, but this stuff I frankly don't understand. Those bare shoulders, for instance, with protruding bones, and those legs, longer than any man ever possessed in proportion to the body. I can't admit them, and I'm afraid I don't get on any better with some of the landscapes. I saw a picture once," he went on, "in the making. It appeared to me at first impossible. There were lights there I couldn't conceive, colouring that seemed absolutely unnatural, and yet on one wild day, when the sea was lashed and riven with a tremendous storm which broke through the horizon, and opened the heavens upon us, the whole thing became possible. Here I should want to see a

similar miracle before I could admit the truth of these pictures, before they could mean anything to me."

She smiled as they left the place.

" I am not quite like you," she admitted. " I fancy I understand what this man attempted, but I fancy I see also that he did not succeed. I find some beauty in his failure. You see only disaster. Well, later on perhaps. . . . And now ? Will you take tea with me in my little flat ? "

He hesitated. That long evening which he had planned in his rooms, with his books, the undernote of the City always in his ears, seemed to him suddenly less attractive.

" I had an even more daring idea," he confided. " I wondered whether you would not dine with me."

" Not with those others ? " she asked swiftly. " Just you alone with me ? "

" That is what I meant."

" There is perhaps nothing else I can think of which would give me so much pleasure," she acknowledged. " Now let me think. Where shall we go ? "

" Wherever you say," he answered.

" But what are your tastes ? Do you like a great place with many people to see, and much lighting ? Or you like the quiet rooms, with the tables a long way apart, and the lights all shaded, and one need not whisper."

" I like what you like," he assured her.

" Then we will dine at Henri's," she decided. " I know where it is—quite close to the Palace. At what time ? "

" I will send the car for you at eight o'clock," he suggested.

" And you ? "

" You will find me upon the threshold of the

restaurant," he assured her. " At seven o'clock Reginald is bringing me some papers to sign, but if you prefer it I will put him off, and fetch you."

She shook her head.

" So long as you are waiting for me," she murmured, " I know that it is going to be a very happy evening."

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XVIII

Was it, Peter Cradd wondered, a lack of experience on his part, some tactless act perhaps, an imperfect comprehension of what was expected of him that very nearly brought disaster upon an evening otherwise so pleasant? Henri's was the first restaurant in which he had ever dined which really merited the term " *intime.*" The tables were small, and far apart, the candle-lamps upon them delicately shaded. There was scarcely any other illumination in the room, so that a certain sense of mystery seemed to pervade the place, enhanced perhaps by the noiselessness of the service, the waiters passing backwards and forwards over a carpet of unusual thickness. Dinner itself, ordered by Peter Cradd —who was gaining experience—assisted by the principal *maître d'hôtel*, was a complete success. The wine was excellent, without being too dry, and certainly his companion—Peter Cradd carried that night's memories of her long afterwards in his mind —left nothing to be desired in appearance or charm. She still wore black. Her toilet again seemed fashioned on almost severe lines, yet on lines which even his inexperience found beautiful. He had been, perhaps, a little shy at the commencement of the evening, content to listen to her, and she talked towards the end of the meal very frankly.

" You wonder," she said, " that I am here in London, when I love Italy so passionately. I wonder myself. Life here has been a great disappointment to me, but I linger on for the sake of others. I came here with great hopes. They have failed me. If I go back to Italy, I go back to the confession of failure, and life there will be very hard," she concluded, with a little sigh.

" I know so little about your work here," he ventured, " but you have been on the stage, have you not ? "

" Yes," she acknowledged, " but not the stage of Maisie Fairburn and her kind, nor have I lived her life. I came to sing, and I do not know whether it was your fogs or what it was, but my voice went. I think I told you this at luncheon time, but I did not tell you that I was given a part, and I failed—another part, and I failed again. This morning, my voice was tried once more. It is of no use for the rôle which was suggested for me. I may have a place when I will in musical comedy. That does not please me. I weary you, I fear, Mr. Cradd ? "

" You don't indeed," he assured her. " I love to hear you talk, but I'm so sorry. It seems such hard luck. You would look," he added, " so wonderful upon the stage, so different from these other girls."

She smiled at this, one of his rare compliments.

" It is nice of you to think that," she said, " but then you know I do not like very much to go upon the stage and be admired because, although I am not very large, I have a beautiful figure, and because I carry myself as I should. That is not what I came for. It is all very disappointing."

Peter Cradd was sympathetic, if a little vague. She had talked herself into a state of self-pity, and her eyes were dim with tears.

"I must go back to Italy," she murmured dejectedly, "and I do not wish to go. I must go," she repeated, after a little pause, "or do as so many of these others do—take a lover."

"That wouldn't help you in your profession, would it?" he ventured.

"Perhaps not," she acknowledged, "but one must live, and then if one were not worried always with bills and having to send money home, one might do better. I tried to make my dressmaker see that this afternoon, but she was not at all kind. She says that I owe her too much money, and that she will be paid. What I shall do I cannot say. Do they put people into prison in your country, Mr. Cradd, who cannot pay their bills?"

"Not quite so bad as that," he assured her cheerfully. "How much is this particular one?"

"A very great deal of money," she confided sadly. "Seventy-eight pounds."

"If it will make you happier," he promised, "and you will allow me the privilege, I will pay it for you."

She looked at him for a moment breathlessly. He saw then for the first time the little flecks of red in her deep brown eyes. Her full, soft lips were parted, showing her beautiful teeth.

"Why should you?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should I not, if it pleases me?" he rejoined. "I like to see people happy, and if the thing is worrying you, why, something must be done about it."

"But," she reminded him hesitatingly, "I am almost a stranger."

"Oh no," he replied. "We saw quite a great deal of one another last night, didn't we? And

here we are again to-night, and there's no telling where we shall not be to-morrow."

There came a brief interruption owing to the service of dinner. She appeared to be deep in thought.

" But if I take this money from you, Mr. Cradd," she said presently, " if I let you pay this bill, why, then——"

" Well ? " he murmured encouragingly.

" I lose my liberty."

" Of course you don't," he scoffed. " You must not think that for a moment. Please don't have any such idea. I promise you that the moment I've sent the cheque, I'll forget all about it."

She leaned over and patted his hand.

" You are a dear," she said, smiling up at him. " I am beginning to ask myself whether I shall want you to forget."

As their meal drew towards a close she developed a queer restlessness.

" Would you like to see the end of a show ? " he suggested. " Or shall we go somewhere and dance ? "

" I like it here," she answered, lighting a cigarette. " You talk so pleasantly, Mr. Cradd, and you have so much sympathy. I am tired of shows. I like to dance when I am gay—to-night I feel very happy, but I am serious, not gay. My feet do not jump. I like to sit with you, and talk, and think."

" Tell me about Italy," he begged. " I want to go there. I don't understand anything about them, but I am beginning to be very fond of pictures, and all the pictures I have seen at the galleries which I like best are Italian."

" Come with me and I will show you Italy," she invited, smiling.

A sudden shock of reminiscence kept him silent for a moment. Someone else—perhaps with as little seriousness—had offered to show him Italy.

" I should be an excellent guide," she went on, " and really to visit the country properly, to see the most beautiful places, and to understand where to find all the great treasures, one needs some one who speaks the language. Perhaps, after all, I have found my true profession in life. Perhaps, Mr. Peter Cradd, I was not meant to be a great singer, but just to be a *courrier de luxe*, a fellow-pilgrim in the search for beautiful things."

" Not much of a profession for you," he remarked.

" I don't know," she answered, sipping her liqueur. " Sometimes all my ambitions fade away, and I feel that I could do without them for ever if only I had what is even more important—the sympathy of one lovable human being." . . .

They sat on until they were the last diners. Peter Cradd at last called for his bill, and they strolled out to where his limousine was waiting.

" Shall we look in at the Florida for half an hour ? " he suggested.

She shook her head.

" I am still not in the mood. You shall drive me home, if you will."

" And you can run up and bring me down the dressmaker's account," he proposed.

She made no reply, although a smile flickered upon her lips as they drove off, and her hand felt for his. Peter Cradd was a man of instincts, and he knew quite well that the slightest movement on his part, and her very attractive little head would be on his shoulder. And after all, why not ? he asked himself with an impulse almost of resentment. Why should he always be plagued with these

fantastic scruples, this sense of offending against some indefinable ideal if once he held out his arms to take into his life the thing he craved for? He sat looking steadily ahead of him, the soft white fingers holding his a little tighter, the delicate perfume of her hair perilously seductive. It was such an absurd vein of Quixotism which had crept into his life. Yet he hated to strangle it. He felt somehow that it was of natural growth—a thing which came of its own accord, vouchsafed to him, something with all its torments rather to be cherished than destroyed.

"You are very silent," she complained. "Is it that you think of my dressmaker's bill, and regret?"

He laughed.

"I was thinking about something very different," he confessed.

"You ride with me alone, and your thoughts travel far away?" she pouted. "Is that gallant?"

"My thoughts were of you," he told her.

"Tell me them at once, please."

"I was wondering," he confided, "why——"

"I insist."

"Why I do not ask you to take me to Italy?"

Insensibly her body touched his. She had drawn a little closer.

"I, too, was wondering that," she murmured. "Why do you not?"

"There is only one thing which stands in my way," he told her, "and that isn't a real thing, that is just a ghost. How does one get rid of a ghost? What should you do if you were haunted, Eula?"

She made a little grimace.

"I should say to myself," she whispered, "that ghosts had no place in real life, and so I should forget them, and take what real life had to offer."

He felt a little thrill at her words. It was impossible to doubt their implication. She was lying almost in his arms, her lips close to his. He blessed fate for a sudden hold-up at a crowded and well-lit crossway.

"Why, we are nearly at your flat!" he exclaimed, looking out of the window.

"Are we?" she murmured. "I am quite content like this, but perhaps my sitting-room will be more comfortable."

They drew up before her front door a few minutes later, and he handed her out.

"You will fetch me the bill?" he invited.

She turned the key in the lock, and motioned him to enter.

"But I thought you told me," he protested——

"That does not apply to you," she interrupted. "You see," she added, laughing up at him, "you are going to pay my dressmaker's bill."

It was a very pretty, though tiny, apartment into which she showed him. She established him in an easy-chair, pointed to where an unopened bottle of whisky and a syphon of soda stood on the sideboard, and turned towards a connecting door leading into another room.

"I have new shoes, and they hurt," she confided. "I change into my slippers. I bring you, then, the bill."

He heard her humming as she moved about in the next room, heard the fall of her shoes, even the fluttering of her garments. Every pulse of his man's body was tingling, and then from some unknown place, in some unknown way, came that strange, paralysing instinct of—what? Self-preservation? Self-immolation? He wrestled with it frantically, helplessly. With trembling fingers, he

drew a packet of notes from his pocket-book, scribbled upon the back of a card some hasty word of farewell, and tip-toed his way to the door. He crept down the stairs with all the sensations of a guilty schoolboy. Yet, as he stepped into the street, it was with a quaint feeling of freedom that he welcomed the cool breeze which blew in his face. He entered the car almost furtively. Looking upward, as he glided off, he fancied he could see a slim form standing motionless at the window.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XIX

On the morrow, he understood all about it. Without a moment's warning, he came face to face with Louise in Kensington Gardens. She looked at him wonderingly. In his town clothes, and with the air of greater self-possession which he had acquired during the past months, he was almost unrecognisable.

"Peter Cradd!" she exclaimed. "It really is you, Peter Cradd?"

"Yes, it is I," he answered. "I have been wondering whether I should ever see you."

He forgot to release her hand, and she seemed scarcely to notice the fact. His eyes were striving to read in her face the story of her recent life. The old courage was there, the almost supercilious outlook upon the world and its doings, but her deep blue eyes were fringed with faint lines of fatigue, her mouth was a shade discontented. She looked tired, like one who has been knocking unsuccessfully at the door of fate. Yet she remained beautiful. He had tried often to imagine how she would look to him in London. She seemed more beautiful even than his dreams.

"Why have you not been to see me?" she demanded.

"How did I know where you were?" he rejoined. "And how could I come without being asked?"

There was still wonder in her eyes as she looked at him.

"Civilisation becomes you," she decided. "You have travelled a long way?"

There was a certain bitterness in his reply.

"I have learned exactly where to buy all my clothes, the restaurants to go to and those to avoid, how to order a dinner from a *maître d'hôtel*, a little about the vintages of wines, and I have a hazy idea where the best pictures in London are to be found. Apart from that," he admitted, "I am pretty well where I was."

"You have a house?"

"I have rooms in Arlington Street. Just four rooms and a maisonnette kitchen. A man and his wife look after me; the woman's niece is, I believe, part of the establishment, and my chauffeur cleans the silver when necessary."

She laughed.

"I am beginning to feel I know all about you."

"And you?"

"I have become a wobbler," she confessed. "Half my days I spend in my little attic studio in Chelsea, the other half in the splendour of Carriswood House. I have seen something of what one calls 'society.' I have been to some studio parties of which I am quite sure that you and George would disapprove, a new man has asked me to marry him, and my old admirer is going to ask me again within a few hours."

"And what are you going to say to him?" Peter Cradd demanded breathlessly.

" If I only knew! If I had only known," she went on, " there would have been no need for him to have asked me more than once, because I have come to the conclusion that I want to be married."

They were walking together now very slowly along one of the side paths.

" And you? " she continued. " Tell me about your adventures."

" I have had nothing that could be called an adventure," he said.

She met the clear glance of his steadfast, deep-set eyes, and she sighed.

" Oh, Peter Cradd," she bemoaned, " why aren't you someone just as nice as yourself but with just a little difference, so that I could take you to Italy? "

" Anything I could do in the way of changing myself," he began, a shade of wistfulness underlying his words——

" Ah, but you mustn't change," she interrupted. " You're nice as you are. Nowadays," she went on, " everyone seems to do exactly as they like. My greatest woman friend has just gone out to Kenya with a man to shoot big game, and left her husband quite contentedly to make useless laws in the House of Commons. They all say that it is an age of freedom, and yet I don't know! Do you think that I could take you with me to Italy, Peter Cradd? Would you promise to admire only what I told you to admire, and behave nicely all the time? "

" I'd try," he agreed, " to look at everything through your eyes, but as for the rest, I am not sure. No man can be altogether sure."

" And I suppose the woman would hate it if he could be," she mused. " If only we could call back our summer sunshine, and sit on Seagull's Island,

my friend. This city life is crushing the dreams out of me. I shall do something foolish before long, and then I shall go back to Seagull's Island and regret it."

"Take me to Italy," he begged suddenly. "I am forty-six years old, I have a wife and a disgusting family, and I don't belong anywhere, nor am I ever likely to. The longer I live the more I realise that one never really changes, but I have some qualities. They have stood me in evil stead all my life. They might come to my help now. I am faithful."

"You have been faithful to dreams?" she asked him swiftly.

"I have," he answered, with a sudden little shiver as he thought of his last night's escape.

"It is the greatest quality a woman's man can possess," she meditated. "Peter Cradd, you have unsettled me again. A few days ago I was quite sure that I would marry Arthur Durcott. Now I don't know. Why did you choose to walk in Kensington Gardens this morning?"

"Do we ever choose anything?" he speculated. "I think I must have come because it has been too long already since I have seen you."

They had reached the gates.

"I am tired," she said. "I was dancing all night, anyhow. Call me a taxicab, please."

"My car is there," he suggested, a little hesitatingly.

"Better still," she approved. "Are you in a hurry?"

"I have nothing whatever to do."

"Let us drive then somewhere."

"Ranelagh? I have just been made a member."

"The very place."

She settled herself down amongst the cushions, and breathed a sigh of content.

"How delightful to own a car like this," she reflected. "When I come to think of it I spend half my time living on other people's bounty. As a matter of fact," she continued, "none of the Cariswood cars are really comfortable, and Arthur's is a horrible affair. If I take you to Italy, will you bring this?"

"Everything that I possess will be yours," he assured her, "including this."

"Are you hinting at settlements?" she laughed. "Peter Cradd, I'm ashamed of you. You have been in bad company where ladies are to be bought and sold."

He flushed a little. That dressmaker's bill was in his mind.

"You must not make fun of me," he begged.

They drove to Ranelagh almost in silence. She was so obviously comfortable and at peace that he made no attempt at conversation. They passed through the reception rooms into the Winter Garden, and a waiter brought them cocktails. She became suddenly talkative again.

"You're the most restful person," she declared, "and yet you have a queer quality of companionship. How do you manage it? What did you do with all these gifts of yours through those dreary years you told me about? You must have had locked compartments in your mind."

He shuddered, as he always did when reminded of the past.

"My life made no demands upon me. I simply trod the moving stairs."

"A suggestive thought," she reflected. "The more intensely we live, the greater our talents and powers of observation, the more demands life makes upon us, and I suppose the converse is true. I dined last night with the President of the Royal

Academy, the night before—a small party—with a Cabinet Minister and some very clever people. Of course it is delightful. On the other hand, it's a strain. I was quite serious when I said a little time ago, Peter Cradd, that I should like our summer sunshine back again, and Seagull's Island, and you with your mouth open wondering what strange things I was trying to pull from the sky and earth for my canvas. There is too little of the lotus life for us nowadays."

"In Italy," he reminded her, "you could perhaps indulge in it."

"Supposing I agreed to come," she said suddenly. "Supposing I sent you off to Cook's directly after luncheon, and told you to get our tickets for the eleven o'clock train to-morrow, how should you be feeling then, I wonder?"

"Like a schoolboy," he answered, "like a blind man who has heard all his days how marvellous a thing the world is, and is suddenly vouchsafed the gift of sight."

"Why do you like me?" she asked curiously.

"Doesn't everyone else, after their fashion?" he rejoined with a certain depression in his tone. "A stranger question than that is why do you like me?"

She turned to speak to an acquaintance who had come in from the golf links. Peter Cradd reflected how seldom during all their acquaintance they had spoken of personal things. She must have known from the first of his adoration, yet he had never put it into words. He had known always that, unreasonable though it might seem, he had made some sort of appeal to her, and of that too they had never spoken. Now they were calmly discussing an adventure which would link their lives together. He wondered almost passionately how much in

earnest she was? He heard her voice talking to the man who was bending over her.

"Tell me, Sir William," she asked, "are there still golf links in Florence?"

"I believe they've reopened them lately. They're very bad though. Nearly all the links in Italy are. Why, are you thinking of coming to Florence?"

"I have some idea of it," she told him—and Peter Cradd's heart jumped.

"Hope you'll let us know," her acquaintance said courteously. "My wife would be so glad to see you again."

He bowed and took his leave. Louise looked after him, smiling.

"He's our Ambassador to Italy," she confided. "Do you think we should be asked to tea with the rest of the world, or would they give a dinner in our honour?"

"Neither, I should hope," Peter Cradd replied fervently. "I am not used to those sort of people yet."

"Well, you wouldn't meet any of them if we took our little expedition," she assured him, laughing. "Sir William is a very delightful man in the ordinary way, but as an Ambassador, he takes himself terribly seriously. Are you giving me lunch, by any chance?"

"It would make me very happy," he answered.

"Let us have it here," she suggested. "Plain, good things, and no bright conversation. What a rest!"

"I'll go and see about a table," he said, rising.

"And send me the telephone boy," she begged. "I must let Lady Cariswood know. They have a lot of people coming." . . .

They lunched very pleasantly at a window table. A watery sun was struggling to make its way

through the grey, misty clouds, but there was every sign of an early winter in the leafless trees, and a few patches of snow from a fugitive storm lying about in the sheltered places. She looked out, and shivered.

" I should like to feel the real sunshine once more, Peter Cradd, wouldn't you ? " she said.

" I am feeling it now," he told her.

Afterwards he thought it strange that in this small, pleasant room, over their simple meal, they should have talked more intimately than ever before, should have put into words the unspoken meditations of their solitary hours.

" I wonder why you care for me so much ? " she mused. " I don't appeal to everyone. Tell me—did you like me from the first ? "

" ' Like ' is scarcely the word," he answered, looking across at her earnestly. " I didn't venture. You seemed to me like someone walking in another world, but I felt you—I felt you when you were there, and I felt you after you had left. You made the life of dreams more wonderful than actual living."

She studied him with tender curiosity in her deep blue eyes.

" I wonder," she said, " in what phase of your life you learned to think like that ? "

For once he was almost impatient.

" Sometimes you forget," he reminded her, " I have learned nothing, I know nothing. Perhaps the one good point about it all is that I have avoided sophistication. I had no need to use my poor brains. The thoughts came, the feelings came. I had no need to beckon."

There was a look of swift and complete appreciation in her eyes as they met his across the table. She smiled at him understandingly.

" Peter," she said, " I think I will go to Italy with you."

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XX

PETER CRADD spent two very busy days. It was Tuesday when he had met Louise in the Park, and Saturday they were to leave. He worried patiently at Cook's until he got exactly what he wanted—the drawing-room in the Pullman to Dover, the best cabin on the boat to Calais. The car was to follow them, and they were to motor from Paris by the Côte d'Azur. He made all his plans thoroughly, and with care, yet all the time he moved like a man who has wandered on to another planet, uncertain of his bearings, terrified to realise his happiness lest at any moment everything should fade away. On Thursday afternoon she came to tea with him in Arlington Street. He had filled the little room with dark red roses from Solomon's. There were cakes enough from Rumpelmayer's for a school treat, yet at first when she entered a cold fear struck him. The slightly strained look was back about her eyes and her lips. A moment afterwards, however, her face was buried amongst the clusters of roses, and she was laughing.

" I believe you mean to spoil me," she said.

" I shall try," he promised.

" You realise, of course," she warned him, throwing herself into an easy-chair, " that I shall have no clothes. I'm supposed to be going away for the week-end to some people who live near Tunbridge Wells. Horrible idea, the week-end part of it," she concluded, with a little shiver. " The sort of enterprise a lady typist and her employer embark upon."

" Our week-end will be like a rainbow," he told her gravely, " because it will stretch from one end of heaven to the other. There is no need even to think——"

" I am reproved," she interrupted him. " I was almost vulgar, wasn't I? I shall have my tea here, lounging, and my cakes on the table by my side. What was I telling you about? Oh, I know, my clothes. Do you realise that you'll have to buy me clothes in Paris? "

There was again that little inward flash in his eyes which came with every personal thought concerning the great adventure. Buy clothes—for her!

" That will make me very happy," he said simply.

" It will be rather wonderful," she reflected, " to be able to order just what one wants. You are really rich, aren't you, Peter? I'm not miserly, and it doesn't make any difference—just curiosity."

" I don't know what people like you would consider wealth," he remarked. " I think I have, when I have provided for those other people, about ten thousand a year."

" Wonderful! " she murmured. " We shall be able to afford a villa at Fiesole. How I have longed for that! I shall begin to teach you Italian upon the journey."

Again that thrill. Their journey! The journey alone with her!

" I am afraid I shall be very stupid," he regretted. " I don't even speak French, and I am afraid," he added, with a little sigh, " I am rather old to begin learning foreign languages."

" One doesn't learn," she encouraged him. " One just picks it up hearing other people. Italian, as a matter of fact, is easier than French."

"It will be necessary," he began presently, in somewhat embarrassed fashion, "for us to talk about money. You must have an income——"

She stopped him with a passionate little gesture.

"Not yet," she begged. "Please don't talk about that. I want to forget it. It isn't just for the sake of luxury, it isn't—oh, why am I trying to justify myself to myself?" she broke off. "What I want is to stop drifting in a world I am beginning to hate. Something would happen to me soon, Peter Cradd, if I went on living any longer half in Chelsea, half in Grosvenor Square. The world's gone mad, I think—the Chelsea world especially. No one seems to believe in anything worth while any longer. The latest form of humour seems to be a game of moral suicide. And in Grosvenor Square, we dance like marionettes to a different tune. It's all artificial, both sides of it, Peter. I was nearer the truth on Seagull's Island—I mean to live nearer the truth in Florence, and wherever we may go afterwards. . . . You have the tickets?"

"I have everything," he told her.

"Show them to me."

He opened a drawer, and handed her a little packet. Her fingers turned over the familiar yellow pages—Victoria—Dover—Pullman—Dover-Calais, State Cabin—Calais-Paris—tickets for the first series at luncheon. She handled them all, wrapped them up again, and passed them back to him.

"Nothing like the sight of real, practical things to bring one's feet to earth," she said, smiling. "There are the tickets. One believes one is going to travel when one sees them. I wonder what George will say?"

"George is a parson," he exclaimed, almost impatiently. "He'll think it terrible because he

has to. It is our lives that are in the balance, not his. Outside this room, I can't think. I have only one fear—the fear of not being able to make you happy. If I fail there, life fails. You see, I am consumed with an immense selfishness."

She lit a cigarette, and stretched herself lazily out in front of the fire.

"I am glad I came, Peter," she confided, "you always soothe and convince me somehow. You do it in such an effortless fashion, too. So many people argue in order to be convincing. You don't trouble to do that. I wish it were Saturday to-morrow."

"To-morrow is Friday," he reminded her. "There will be only one more day."

"Dear, practical man!" she murmured. "To-night—I don't think I shall like to-night, Peter. Lady Durcott is giving a dinner, and afterwards we go on to dance at one of these places. Thank heavens it will all be over soon. What are you doing?"

"Dining with my lawyer, or rather he is dining with me. That's why I rather wanted to speak about——"

"Please wait," she insisted. "For that you must wait. Can't you understand?"

"I am sorry," he apologised humbly.

She threw her cigarette away, and rose.

"It's stupid of me," she admitted, forcing a smile, "but you see mentally I have been through so much. I haven't your adorable simplicity of vision. I think that is what I like about you, Peter Cradd," she confessed, resting her hand softly in his. "You see everything full face, and you are quite right. When you see things like that, truthfully and honestly, those little serpentlike thoughts that shoot about inside one's brain are

finished. Forgive me if I was cross for a minute. Everything will come all right."

"You are not going?" he asked in dismay.

"My dear," she said, pointing to the clock, "I have been here for an hour, and you haven't an idea how many things I have to do."

He opened the door with a gesture of resignation.

"The car is waiting for you," he told her, as he followed her out. "Use it as long as you like. I am only a few yards from my Club here, where I am dining. To-morrow?"

She shook her head.

"Not at all to-morrow," she decided. "At a quarter to eleven at Victoria, on Saturday. I shall have no luggage for registration. See to your own, and be at the left-hand bookstall. Then we can go straight to our places."

His heart was thumping against his ribs.

"At a quarter to eleven," he repeated, as he handed her into the car.

Mr. Anthony Spearmain could never altogether conceal his surprise at the amazing social development of his client, the little man who less than six months ago had walked wearily into his office in threadbare clothes, carrying his bag of samples, and sat timidly upon the edge of the chair whilst the wonderful news of his great good fortune was disclosed to him. He was greeted by Peter in the hall of a Club to which he would have been perfectly content to have belonged himself, with just the right amount of courtesy, and just the right amount of assurance. Peter Cradd's dinner clothes conformed absolutely to the fashion of the moment, and he wore them as though it had been his custom to change for dinner every night of his life. His sunburnt skin and athletic pursuits had given more

power to his face, and had very much improved his carriage. Mr. Anthony Spearmain, like many others who have no need to be, was something of a snob. A few months ago he would have shivered at the thought of having to dine in public with his new client. To-day no trace of that feeling remained. The development of Peter Cradd along his own lines and the lines suggested for him would always remain one of the wonders and triumphs of the lawyer's career. Mr. Spearmain drank a glass of sherry, and Peter Cradd a dry Martini, although in those hours he scarcely knew what he ate or drank or how he moved through the ordinary routine of the day. Even his companion, as they took their places at the dinner table, noticed something unusual in his manner—a sort of detachment which, whilst it left him talking and acting like a perfectly reasonable human being, nevertheless suggested the continual aloofness of his thoughts.

"Looking forward to your trip abroad, I suppose?" the lawyer asked curiously.

"Very much," his host admitted. "I have always wanted to see Paris, and even more so Florence."

"Are you a linguist, by any chance?"

Peter Cradd shook his head.

"I can't speak a word of any language except my own," he confessed. "I shall have a companion, though, who speaks both French and Italian."

"A companion?"

The lawyer was mildly interested. He repeated the word as though hoping for some explanation. His client, however, volunteered none. In view of Louise's attitude that afternoon, he had decided to take no one into his confidence concerning his great adventure. It would all be known soon enough, and there would be time then to carry out the plans which were in his mind.

"Well, I'm glad you're not going alone," Mr. Spearmain said, after a little pause. "That's Reggie's only complaint about you; he declares that you have fits of what he calls 'mooning.'"

"Perhaps I have. All the same, there have been times when I have very much enjoyed having him for a companion."

"He was always looking forward to showing you around the Continent himself."

Peter Cradd smiled.

"I am going to see it rather differently," he confided.

"When are you off? Saturday morning?"

"Saturday morning, by the eleven o'clock train."

"If you are not doing anything to-morrow night, Reggie wanted to know if he could dine with you?"

"I'll telephone. I may have a good many things to do just before I leave. However, if he'll leave it open until four or five o'clock."

"I'm sure he will," his father promised. "Now, let me tell you, Mr. Cradd, just why I said I must see you again before you left. I am getting more and more worried about your people."

His host nodded.

"I don't wonder. From what I know of them I should imagine they are indulging in every form of extravagance and are living just as foolishly as people could."

"They are becoming unreasonable," the lawyer declared. "You have created a trust for them which provides an ample—a really handsome—income, but three times already they have, with your consent, drawn large sums for ridiculous investments. Now I understand your two sons, who have only just bought the motor business, are already in need of further capital."

"What about the business?" Peter Cradd enquired. "Does it possess any possibilities?"

"The books have been kept just as badly as they possibly could be," Mr. Spearmain said severely. "Everyone connected with it since it was started seems to have gone on the principle of drawing out whatever money he needed at any time he felt disposed. A business cannot be conducted like that, Mr. Cradd."

"Naturally not," was the prompt assent. "If they continue on those lines, wind it up. They still have the income from the trust securities, which are not to be touched."

"You wouldn't care to see them and have a talk before you go away, I suppose?" the lawyer suggested.

"Not for anything in the world," Peter Cradd protested hastily. "My position as regards my family, Mr. Spearmain, is absolutely unchangeable. It is my fervent hope that I may never see one of them again. I may write that letter I spoke of, but I should think even that is doubtful, now that they've begun to make fools of themselves so soon."

Mr. Spearmain sipped his wine thoughtfully.

"You know, Mr. Cradd," he said, "I can understand your feeling a great deal embittered, from what you have told me, but at the same time one must consider, these are your own sons."

"Look here," Peter Cradd declared portentously, leaning a little across the table, "I make no excuses for myself, and I claim no virtue in this world, save the virtue of honesty. Those two young men make not the slightest appeal to me in any shape or form. I am undoubtedly their father. If I were a sensitive man my attitude would be one of apology towards the world for having produced two such worthless

and unpleasant young people. As it is, I simply don't care. I endured them for all the years I was forced to. They shared everything I had—or rather they didn't share it because they took everything, they and Lena, and my wife. I've been through this before with you, Mr. Spearmain, but I want you to know that prosperity and a larger outlook upon life have not changed me in the least. Those feelings which you would call 'natural' feelings have never once in the smallest degree asserted themselves. Their financial claim upon me I admit. You have a hundred and fifty thousand pounds to use on their behalf. Let them spend it or waste it if they will. I don't care. Treat them as wards of your own, Mr. Spearmain, and don't ever appeal to me as a person having the slightest interest in them. Don't consider their feelings, or their wishes, only their financial welfare. Let them be bankrupt if it's for their ultimate good. It's your job to see that they have enough to live on, and for that purpose you have forty thousand pounds put away which they cannot anticipate by a day. With the provision which I have made for them, my duties begin and end."

"Very good," Mr. Spearmain agreed. "You are certainly lucid enough. What I shall do, then, is to put an accountant in the place to-morrow and ascertain exactly whether any profit has been made in the business or whether there is any prospect of making a profit, and if he decides adversely I shall wind it up. I take it that it is your wish that no further part of the capital I hold should be made over to them?"

"Not a penny," was the firm reply. "They are lazy, foolish, extravagant young men, who never work hard enough at anything to make a success of it. They were always losing jobs in the old days.

There will be a thousand a year or so each for them to spend on their gluttonous lives and the interest on the remainder of the capital."

"Your daughter, Lena," the lawyer confided hesitatingly, "is, I understand, on the point of becoming engaged."

"Quite natural," her father remarked. "Her sort of appearance might appeal to a certain type of young man—that, coupled with the knowledge of her money. Let her get married, by all means. If I am in England I will go to the wedding, and send a present. If I am abroad, I will send the present and a telegram."

"So that's that!" the lawyer murmured.

"Precisely."

"Your wife," Mr. Spearmain continued, after a slight cough of hesitancy, "appears to continue her friendship with Mr.—er—Mr. Bloxom, the person with whom she invested a considerable amount of money."

"It must certainly be," Peter Cradd sighed, "a friendship of self-interest on his part. Choose a more interesting subject for conversation if you can, please. The fatuousness of my late wife with regard to her offensive friend scarcely seems to blend in spirit with the flavour of this Château Mouton Rothschild. I am taking you at your word, Mr. Spearmain. I am giving you fine claret instead of champagne."

"You could do nothing to please me better," the lawyer declared reverently. "Once a week I permit myself red wine, although seldom such a treat as this."

"We have still half a bottle to drink," his host pointed out. "I will ask you, therefore, to say your last word concerning my family."

"Then it will be simply this," the lawyer con-

cluded. "I understand that, holding your power of attorney, I have your absolute instructions that no more capital is to be disturbed for any purpose whatsoever?"

"You have those instructions," his client affirmed. "As regards my daughter, you know the share which should be apportioned to her upon her marriage. See that she has it, and see that it is settled upon her. As to her fiancé, I have no curiosity, no feeling of any sort, except that I am sorry for him."

Mr. Spearmain permitted himself to be served with another glass of the claret. He then and there came finally to the conclusion that on the subject of his family Peter Cradd was a man of ice.

"Where will you have your letters forwarded to?" he asked.

"That I will let you know from Paris. By-the-by, you have a firm of lawyers who are your agents there, have you not?"

"Certainly."

"I may possibly have business for them. Let me know their name and address."

The lawyer scribbled upon the back of a card and handed it across the table.

"You will find Mr. Forsyth a very pleasant and useful person," he said. "He is legal adviser to our Embassy, and holds a very important position in the social world."

Peter Cradd smiled.

"I do not think that I shall see much of the social world," he confided.

Mr. Spearmain's curiosity revived. The time had passed when he could talk as he chose to this curious client, but he still made one attempt to penetrate the other's reserve.

"Your companion——" he began.

" One half-glass more claret," Peter Cradd interrupted. " I have ordered our coffee and brandy in the smoking-room."

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXI

As the hours crawled on, Peter Cradd felt a greater serenity of mind, a more actual and personal apprehension of the happiness which was so close at hand. He was no longer a dreamer, contemplating a possibility, but he was a man moving inevitably on towards the desire of his life. He completed his shopping on the following morning, and lunched with Reginald Spearmain at Ciro's Grill Room afterwards. That young man had been promised by his father a very desirable increase to his quarter's allowance if he should discover the name of his client's companion on the morrow's expedition, and he set himself, as he imagined tactfully, to his task, beginning with the cocktails.

" Rather doing me in the eye, old chap, you know," he remonstrated. " You always promised to let me show you Paris."

" Well, perhaps you shall some day," his host consoled him.

" Yes, but the first time—that's what counts, you know, although most people say, and I'm not sure that they're not right, that you need to take a woman with you round Paris."

" I've heard the same thing," said Peter Cradd.

" You see, one fellow, or two fellows even, are such a mark by themselves," Reggie pointed out. " There they are, you know. A girl says good evening pleasantly, and what about it ? You say

good evening, and she's asking if she can sit at your table in the twinkling of an eye."

"Well, I daresay sometimes that isn't a hardship," Peter Cradd observed.

"Yes, but a fellow likes to choose. You see, there you are, tacked on to something for the evening, unless you do the brutal. As you're not going with me, I rather wish you were taking little Maisie or Eula over, or one of that crowd. Maisie knows the ropes all right. She'd see that no one butted in."

"I daresay you're right. However, my plans are all made now. Supposing we go in to lunch."

So for the time nothing else was possible. Reggie was not, however, entirely disheartened. Fifty quid was fifty quid, and considering the terms they had been on, Peter Cradd could scarcely object if he asked him outright who his companion was to be. He summoned up courage after his second whisky and soda.

"Eleven-o'clock train, I suppose," he began. "Got your tickets?"

"Yes."

"Pullman?"

"Yes."

"Cabin?"

"Yes."

"Seats on the train and luncheon tickets?"

"Yes."

"Where are you staying in Paris?"

"Crillon."

"Got your rooms?"

"Yes."

There was a brief pause. Reggie helped himself to more whisky and soda, and returned to the charge.

"You seem to have thought of everything," he remarked.

" I have."

" Ever seasick ? "

" I've never crossed the Channel," Peter Cradd reminded him. " I've had plenty of rough weather sailing, though."

" What about your companion ? "

" I shall probably find out."

" Well, I hope it's someone who knows their Paris," Reggie ventured.

" I believe that is the case."

Nothing more to be done unless one risked a plain question and a probable snub, Reggie decided. It was perfectly clear that his host meant to keep his own secret.

" Well, if anything happens at the last moment, and your pal can't get away," he said gloomily, " just telephone me. I'll shove a few things into a bag, and come along. I haven't been to Paris for months. Do me good, I think."

" What would do you more good," Peter Cradd told him, " would be two rounds of golf on Saturdays and Sundays, and not so many late nights."

" You're a nice chap to talk about late nights," Reggie grumbled. " You were always willing to keep it up as long as I was. You wouldn't like one last beano to-night, eh ? "

Peter Cradd shook his head.

" I think," he said, " that Paris will be beano enough for me."

" Shall I come and see you off ? " Reggie suggested, receiving unexpectedly a heaven-sent inspiration.

" I should prefer that you did not," was the decided reply. " I have everything arranged, and I dislike bidding adieux to people on the platform. Besides," Peter Cradd concluded, with a far-away gleam in his blue eyes, " you would then meet with

the reward of your perseverance, and discover the identity of my companion."

Reggie opened his lips to protest, then changed his mind. He remembered his host's very considerable veneration for the truth.

"Perfectly right," he admitted. "The governor put me up to it. He wanted to know. Looking after your morals, I expect."

"The duties of a confidential lawyer," Peter Cradd remarked drily, "are even more comprehensive than I thought. What liqueur, Reggie?"

"Snubbed again," the young man observed with unabated cheerfulness. "I'll take a 'fine,' please."

There was no more talk of a confidential nature between the two men. At three o'clock Reggie departed to his labours, and Peter Cradd began to devise desperate methods for passing these last few hours. He wandered about his Club, throwing himself into easy-chair after easy-chair, trying to read magazines upside down, avoiding only the card-room for fear of meeting acquaintances. Finding the Club hopeless, he was gripped by a sudden idea, as he stepped into his car. He drove to Kensington Gardens, and made his way to the spot where he had met her less than a week ago. He turned and walked slowly as they had walked side by side, and his feet seemed to leave the ground and move upon the air. It had been the beginning of her surrender. He recalled the change in her speech, her hesitations, her confessed weariness of the life which was keeping them apart. When he stepped back into his car she was still by his side. He drove to Ranelagh as they had driven. Monosyllables of their fragmentary conversation en route came back to him. He recalled the almost voluptuousness of her pose as she curled up in her seat, far removed, with him, for a

brief space, from the world which had at one time enthralled her, but for which she had now conceived an ever-growing sense of distaste.

Arrived at Ranelagh, he lingered in the Winter Garden, moving one chair carefully and adjusting its red cushion, the more easily to envisage her presence. Florence—it was of Florence they had spoken there. Then he timidly wandered into the now deserted luncheon-room—deserted even by the waiters. He stood by the table which they had occupied, and looked out, almost expecting to see the weak beams of that struggling sunlight instead of the slight drizzle of rain which was now blurring the window-panes. Afterwards he drove back to London, his nerves a little soothed. No matter what she was doing then, or had been doing the night before, those things belonged to a past never to be reopened so long as he lived. He was almost savagely glad at the thought that this episode must cut her off from the brilliant world, must make her dependent upon him for all the things a woman so badly needs in life. Affection—if she needed that she could well have all that she desired. He felt a glow of infinite tenderness, an infinite capacity for sympathy and love. A new confidence in himself blazed up. After all, he knew what she wanted. He knew wherein her escape lay. Regret? She should never regret. The world was theirs—not the world which carries visiting cards, but the world of exquisite beauty, of art, of picturesque spots, of sun and wind and sea, and all the wonders which Nature bestows only upon its disciples. How could she be anything else but happy? He began to think almost angrily of the weeks and months they had wasted, the new moons upon which they had not gazed together. . . .

He let himself into his room, still fragrant with

the masses of flowers which had framed her visit there. There were the usual piles of letters upon the table, but standing upon the mantelpiece, propped against a little bronze image, was a large square envelope, in her vigorous but barely legible handwriting. As he looked at it, a curious sensation seized him. The world seemed crumbling away. A new and awful thought laid an icy hand upon his heart. He tried to move, but his knees were trembling. He sank into a chair, gripping its arms with both hands, staring at the envelope. Nerves, he told himself angrily. He was all worked up into an emotional state by the nearness of his happiness. Of course she would send him a line. She could scarcely let all the hours of that long day pass without a word. He staggered to his feet. He wondered for a moment if the " fine " at Ciro's had been as mild as it had seemed—or had he perhaps had two ? His knees shook, his fingers were hot. He moved, however, to the mantelpiece, caught up the envelope, and with a sudden passionate gesture, tore out its contents.

" MY DEAR," he read, " *I cannot come. I have no words to cover my shame, no words which could make you see what is in my heart. I cannot come.*

" LOUISE."

There it was, his death sentence, or rather the death sentence of his new life, traced out in frantic scratches of the pen, little blots, and even a fantastic ink smudge. " I cannot come." He must have misunderstood, he told himself. The thing was absurd. Only yesterday she had sat in that chair, they had spoken of the tickets for the journey. The wet fingers opened, and he drew out again the sheet of paper—" I cannot come." He sank into

an easy-chair. As yet the torment had not begun. Only the bewilderment was there. He took the tickets from the drawer, examined them, remembered the care he had taken to reserve a special table on the restaurant car, the order to a florist to see that the state cabin was decked with flowers. "I cannot come." He rose to his feet, and dashed the little bundle of documents upon the floor. Then he began to laugh—a quaintly sounding effort, the same laugh which had surprised his family that morning at breakfast at Park Avenue, Ealing. It came to an end with a little choke. He sought refuge from his thoughts by walking fiercely. He strode up and down the little room. With the movement his brain began to work again. He began to see through the cold fog of horror in which he had suddenly become enshrouded. He saw beyond—hell. He pictured the night and the morning agonies to come, the aching of the heart when he realised how near to him had come the desire of his poor life. He could conceive nothing beyond that was not horrible—nothing except forgetfulness. It was hell into which he looked, where human beings crawled about like insects and animals, their souls long ago passed away. The vision excited him. A vicious desire for self-abasement seized him. He snatched at the telephone book, tore over the pages greedily. Yet when he asked for a number his voice was steady.

"1807 Kensington," he demanded . . . "Madame Tregenti? Is that you, Eula?"

"Who is it?" she asked, a little wearily, he thought.

"It is I," he answered, "Peter Cradd."

"You?" she exclaimed, and there was life in her voice again. "Why, I thought that you had forgotten me. You never answered my note."

"Will you dine with me to-night?" he invited.

"Dine with you—of course I will," she accepted enthusiastically.

"The same place. I shall be waiting for you as I was before. I will send the car at the same time."

"How delightful!"

"And Eula——"

"Yes, dear Peter Cradd."

"Wear your tight shoes," he told her, and banged down the receiver.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXII

It was half-way through the service of dinner, delayed at its start by the consumption of various cocktails, when she found herself sitting in an almost empty room with her hand in his, that she fully realised the change in him.

"Has anything happened to you, Peter Cradd?" she asked.

"What should have happened?"

She smiled happily.

"Why, nothing, I suppose, but you talk so much more to-night. You seem in a way, so much more human, and yet—you will not be angry with me?"

"I couldn't," he assured her, "you look too beautiful."

"More compliments!" she laughed. "You seem a little wild. I am almost afraid of you. If you were not you, I should think that you had been drinking."

"I haven't. I thought of it."

"But why? You see, I had some reason for asking you whether anything had happened? You are changed. There is no denying it."

"For the worse?" he demanded.

She looked at him out of her beautiful eyes. It was as though she were seeking to find something in his face which still eluded her, for there was a note of faint wistfulness in her tone, almost of disappointment.

"When we dined here before," she said, "I will confess that I hoped for so much from you, and nothing that I could say or do could pass through that terrible reserve of yours. Now to-day I feel somehow that you are different, that you are nearer to me, and yet farther away from the whole world. I am almost afraid."

He laughed bitterly.

"Afraid of a poor little creature like me?" he scoffed. "Five feet eight and a half, and narrow-shouldered! An insignificant little person whose life has been spent in slavery. What could I do to hurt you, child?"

"I don't know," she answered, still vaguely disturbed. "Peter Cradd, tell me, has any trouble come, because I think—people have always said—that I have sympathy? All that I have is yours if you ask for it. I would try so hard to comfort you."

He smiled at her hopelessly. The chains which had been forged about him were for eternity. A prisoner he would always be, but even a prisoner can have his moments. He can kill the greater things with the lesser.

"Ask me no questions, Eula," he begged. "I have had a disappointment. Let it remain at that, please. It isn't my money I've lost," he went on grimly. "It isn't any of the things which really count if one looks at life properly, but I wasn't prepared. Eula, we are the last people here."

She rose swiftly to her feet, and he paid the bill. His hand shook as he produced his note-case, but

his voice remained steady enough. He remembered to tip the wine waiter, and the *maître d'hôtel*, he remembered her address, and he gave it clearly to the chauffeur.

"You are coming to sit with me for a little time?" she whispered, as they drove off.

"Yes," he answered, "if you still want me."

Her hand tightened upon his. This time, as her head drooped towards his shoulder, he made no movement away. He sat rigid, breathing a little quickly, his eyes gazing into the dim panorama of the streets. She crept into his arms, and still he made no movement away. She drew a little sigh of content.

"Peter," she whispered, "you like me a little? I have been so lonely. Please."

He knew without looking that her lips were upturned. He bent his head . . . She disengaged herself gently.

"We are there," she whispered. "Come."

She smoothed her hair, laughing happily as she slipped across the pavement. He followed her into the dark hall, and she clung to him as they mounted the stairs. In the little salon, she put her arms for a moment round his neck. The laughter was still lingering upon her lips, and the red lights in her eyes as she looked up were flaming.

"Peter," she confided, "my shoe hurts."

He tried to match her laughter, the tender anticipation shining out of her face. It was an icy sort of effort, but underneath it there was at least feeling of a sort. She danced away through the door, and he flung his overcoat upon the table. He had the sudden feeling of a condemned prisoner in his cell. He had entered, he had chosen, he had submitted to the locking of the door, and, after all, what was there else in life for him, what could

there be? Who could tell what deep draughts of consolation he might not draw from all those things which many of those greater than he in the world had found so wonderful? They had not waited only for the sublime passion, this interminable line of men who had served the world as statesmen, as artists, as great politicians. In this matter of love, perhaps idealism was at fault, perhaps it was well and necessary to keep one's feet upon the earth, to yield to human feeling in order to cling closer to humanity itself. Why should he obey any longer those fantastic instincts of an unnatural exclusiveness? He walked up and down the room with fierce steps. At any moment the door might open, and she would steal out. He could so well imagine how—one long, silken garment, her face so soft with the desire of love, her eyes so full of deep and tender things. He leaned against the mantelpiece, and his head for a moment touched his arms. Then he looked up again, listening to the sound of her movements. It was the idlest impulse, anything to escape from the pressure of his thoughts, which made him glance carelessly at the photographs on her mantelpiece. Suddenly his eyes became riveted upon one—the hindermost. He caught hold of it, stared at it blankly. When at last the door opened, and she stole in, she found him there, the picture still in his hand, an expression of almost helpless wonder in his blue eyes. She had turned the lights low, and she came quite close to him.

"Peter, dear," she whispered, "what is it that interests you so much?"

He held out the photograph. She saw two new lines down the sides of his face, something indescribable in his set eyes.

"How did you get this?" he asked.

"It is the photograph of my husband," she said,

taking it gently from him. "You need not think of him. We have lived apart for years. He has ceased to care for me long ago. He will never come between us, dear."

Peter Cradd leaned forward, and gripped her by the shoulders.

"You are George Barnslow's wife—the wife who left him?" he cried.

"Yes—but, Peter——"

He snatched the photograph back from her, tore it into pieces, and flung them into the fireplace. He left her, looking after him, too frightened to move, pale and half fainting, as he stormed his way, laughing like a madman, out of the room, down the stairs, into the street.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXIII

"THE tightest squeeze of my life!" Reginald declared as he was dragged up into the moving car by the conductor and Peter. "Cheerioh! Never thought I had a chance. Do you know, old bean, I didn't get your note until ten o'clock?"

"I'm sorry," was the brief reply. "I'll explain about it later."

The conductor led them respectfully into the end compartment—a private drawing-room. Reggie looked about him with awe.

"Gad!" he exclaimed. "You are doing yourself well, and no mistake! I feel like a prince. Conductor!"

"Yes, sir."

"Do these infernal licensing laws prevail upon a moving structure?"

"They need not, sir," the man replied, smiling.

"A double brandy and soda," Reggie demanded.

"The same for me," Peter Cradd echoed.

His companion eyed him in unassumed astonishment.

"I say, aren't you breaking out a bit?"

"I had a bad night. My friend is ill—couldn't come. Then this morning, I thought of you, and I sent the note round."

"I don't suppose I've got half my clothes," the young man remarked, "but I was jolly glad to get it. I haven't seen the governor—shall have to send him a wire from Dover. Anyway, there's nothing in my line much at the office. You look as though you'd been having a night out."

"Not much of a one. I haven't slept, though. I shall have a stretch on the sofa."

He closed his eyes to avoid conversation. The Golden Arrow sped on its smooth southward progress. In her bed, just at that hour in the morning, Eula sat up, a little breathless. The lines under her eyes seemed to grow deeper as she read:

"Eula, my dear little friend, I can barely ask for your forgiveness. Here is the truth. The woman I loved disappointed me yesterday, and George Barnslow, your husband, is the one man who has been good to me —my dear and only friend. Will these facts help you to understand my behaviour, which must have seemed so extraordinary? I know how hard life is for you just now. Show me, dear, you forgive me by letting me help to make it easier. Pay this into your bank, please, and forget it. Forgive me if it seems coarse to write of such a thing in a letter of sentiment. I only hope that for the sake of our pleasant times together you will consider our friendship strong enough to accept my little present without offence.

"I am off to Paris this morning. When I come back I shall hope to see you often.

"PETER CRADD."

A cheque for a thousand pounds ! She looked at it, turned it over, looked at it again. Then a sudden flame of passion seemed to seize her. She crumpled the letter and cheque into a ball, and flung them desperately away, buried her face in the pillow, and sobbed. A storm of passion and anger seemed to shake her beautiful body. Presently she grew quieter, and lay quite still for a time. Then she sat up, and, leaning out of bed, picked up the crumpled letter. Carefully she drew the cheque from the envelope, smoothed it out, and laid it in a safe place under her pillow. She rang the bell, and curled herself up in bed.

" Bring me my coffee in an hour, Anna," she told her maid. " I do not wish to be disturbed until then. I wish to sleep."

At Dover, special porters seemed to be waiting for their luggage, and on the boat the two men were ushered into their cabin by an attentive steward. Once more Reggie looked about him in awe-stricken fashion.

" Give you my word I never travelled like this before," he declared. " Absolutely princely ! Are we going to keep this up all the time ? "

" More or less, I hope," his companion assured him. " One has to do the thing properly the first time." . . .

Peter Cradd made little use of the cabin, for the day was unexpectedly fine, and he found a seat on deck. Outwardly, at any rate, he was recovering himself now, and his hand scarcely shook as he read the little announcement which seemed to leap up to meet his eyes :

" *A marriage has been arranged between Sir Arthur Durcott, Baronet, of Blakeney Abbey, Norfolk, and*

Miss Louise Barnslow, daughter of the late Dean Barnslow, of Norwich, and sister of the Reverend George Barnslow, of the Vicarage, Blakeney."

"A marriage has been arranged——" Yes, after all, life, he supposed, was like that—a matter of arrangement. The things that should be, the right pieces of the puzzle, fitting men and women into the right places. He folded up the paper, and sat looking out at the sea. The passion of the night before had left him. He was conscious of a sense of complete calm. He had no feeling of anger towards anyone. He was a little ashamed about Eula. He only hoped that she would accept his present. He thought of her and George more than of his own sorrow, as they sped across the Channel. A miserable affair this loving and not loving. He even went so far as to ask himself whether, after all, the old life on the treadmill had not been better, the old life where one looked neither to the right nor to the left, but passed along on one's dreary errand to the churchyard. He was conscious of a steward addressing him respectfully.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Cradd, if you will let me have your passport I will arrange for the landing tickets. The gentleman in your cabin is not feeling very well, and has ordered a bottle of champagne. He wondered whether you would care to join him."

Peter Cradd suddenly remembered that he had not eaten since dinner-time the night before.

"I think I'd rather have some lunch," he decided.

"I'll show you to the saloon, sir."

For the rest of the journey, Peter Cradd was quite a normal person. He stepped on to foreign soil with a certain amount of curiosity, wondering at all he saw, grumbled at the shaking of the train

on the way to Paris, looked through some of the illustrated French papers with which Reggie had filled their carriage, and found them mildly disgusting. He listened to the young man's plans for their entertainment with such enthusiasm as he could muster.

"Of course," the latter confided, a cigarette in his mouth, and his feet up on the opposite cushions, "if you'd asked my advice, if you'd done this little trip as I'd have suggested, I would have brought Maisie and Eula along. Eula's a little quiet, but she's got a crush on you, and she'd have been the happiest thing alive. They both know Paris, and they'd have armed us around all right. Being alone, though, of course, makes it in a way more exciting. You never know what might happen."

"No, you never know," his companion agreed.

"We'll dine," Reggie decided, "at the Café de Paris. It's a bit old-fashioned, perhaps, but some of the smart women still go there, and it's typical. Then we'll go to the Casino de Paris for an hour, and finish up at the Folies Bergères. After that we'll commence the evening."

"What do you mean—'commence the evening'?" Peter Cradd asked suspiciously.

"The Montmartre, of course. There are the two old places, the Rat Mort and the Abbaye, and half a dozen smaller ones where you'll be amused. How long are we going to stop, mein host?"

"I can't tell you," was the indefinite reply. "I just have the feeling that I don't want to make any plans. Do you mind?"

"Not I, only I didn't want to rush round if we're going to have lots of time about it. I want you to enjoy Paris, you know, Mr. Cradd. It isn't the city it was, but it's a pleasant little spot all the same. Where did you say we are staying?"

"The Crillon."

"That's a good start, anyway," the young man declared. "Sleepy?"

"I am going to sleep," Peter Cradd replied, closing his eyes wearily.

At the Crillon, Reggie was once more moved to astonishment.

"How the mischief you can do it?" he exclaimed to Peter Cradd when, after a bath and change, they stepped into the coupé which had been ordered for the evening. "You haven't come into your money for more than a few months, and here you are doing everything like a prince. Nothing forgotten either. I bet ours is almost the best suite at the Crillon."

"It seemed to me very luxurious," Peter Cradd admitted, "but then you must remember that I have a great many years' hardships to make up for."

"Yes, I know. It isn't the money," Reginald declared; "it's your infernal cleverness in getting the best of everything."

Peter Cradd smiled sadly. The best of everything was certainly what he had set himself out to find. The inducement had been great enough to inspire him even to the point of genius.

"Looks as though my room had been meant for a lady," Reggie remarked Jesuitically. "All sorts of feminine knicknacks about, and enough roses to fill a whole house."

"The roses were ordered for the salon," his host explained. "Flowers are one of my weaknesses." . . .

Reggie appeared to be *persona grata* at the Café de Paris, and they were given one of the best tables. Wonderful ladies smiled, and in several instances lingered to exchange greetings. Reggie found old

acquaintances amongst them, and made many promises for later on.

"Bit slow for you this, I'm afraid, old chap," he apologised, "but this is a regular French dive, and it just happened that those two or three girls I know don't speak a word of English. It will be all right later on. The little fairies at the proper night places, all of them know a few words. Like to dance with the Spanish girl?"

"I should not," Peter Cradd rejoined hastily. "I am not thinking of dancing at all to-night—not until later on, at any rate."

"Just as you like," Reggie agreed good-humouredly. "I shall have a turn with her myself presently, but this sole is a little too good to leave. Wonderful cooking, isn't it?"

"Wonderful!"

They finished their dinner at ten o'clock, and with a second liqueur brandy it was half-past ten before they drove to the Casino de Paris. They had a box, and Peter Cradd gazed listlessly upon a kaleidoscopic display of agile nakedness. Afterwards they strolled round the promenade, and Reggie continued to exchange amenities with an apparently boundless circle of acquaintances.

"I tell you what," he suggested at twelve o'clock, "we'll drop the Folies Bergères for to-night, and get good places at the Abbaye. That's the only place for the really smart cocottes."

"I'm not sure," Peter Cradd protested, a little wearily, "that I am very fond of cocottes—at any rate whether I am in the humour to amuse myself with them to-night. You see I speak no French, and——"

"I'll find you a bright little English or American one later," Reggie promised cheerily. "Nothing like a girl who can talk and laugh and cheer the

lonely fellows up when they're away from home," he added. "You've got a grouch about something, Mr. Cradd. Now you take my advice, and forget it. Life's too short to worry, and there isn't any trouble which should stop one enjoying one's first night in Paris. The only thing that's ever bothered me here is how to word the wire home to the governor to raise the wind. That will never bother you, and I shouldn't let anything else if I were you."

"Your philosophy is excellent," Peter Cradd admitted, "even if a little difficult to follow. As regards these gay young ladies though, I must confess that I find a certain sameness about them. The only English words they appear to know are adjectives such as 'dear' and 'darling,' and their only two desires in life seem to be to have their thirst quenched or to be escorted to their homes. If they want to be taken home so soon, why do they come out at all?"

Reggie roared with laughter, and even Peter Cradd himself smiled.

"You're not quite so ingenuous as you seem, old chap," he exclaimed. "But still, I do agree with you, they are rather monotonous. But you wait. We'll find something different presently."

They mounted the hill. Albert received Reggie at the Abbaye as a long-lost son of the prodigal description. They were installed at one of the best tables, and enveloped at once in waves of geniality, in the midst of which Reggie vanished. A beautiful young girl in a sheath-like dress and with swaying hips crossed the room, and seated herself by Peter Cradd's side.

"Your young friend," she announced, "he tell me you like to know someone who speak English. I speak very good. Your friend likes my friend

very much. He perhaps bring her here. We drink something, yes ? "

They drank something. They drank again.

" I like you," the girl confided.

" You flatter me," he murmured.

" Eh, what ? Say that again," she begged, leaning against his shoulder. " Your long words I not understand. We dance, yes ? "

They danced, sat down, and drank more champagne. Then they repeated the performance. The young woman had linked herself now to Peter Cradd, and sat with her arm through his. Reggie, thoroughly in his element, had a girl on each side of him, and one on the spare chair in front of the table. He had ten milles of Peter Cradd's money in his pocket, to pay the bill and his own expenses, and he was radiantly happy.

" Your friend very gay young man," the girl, whose name, it appeared, was Julie, remarked. " Why you not too ? We dance again, yes, or you rather take me home ? I show you another place if you like—gayer than this."

" Come along then," Peter Cradd agreed, with a surreptitious glance at Reggie. " We'll go alone."

She rose to her feet, and they left the room unnoticed. As she was in the act of taking her cloak from the vestiaire, however, he stopped her.

" Thank you for taking so much care of me," he said. " I am rather tired this evening, and I should like to go straight back to the hotel. Will you accept this little present, and excuse me ? "

She caught a glimpse of the two mille notes he was pressing into her hand, and gave a little jump of joy.

" I let you go, yes," she conceded. " You very nice man. You come again to-morrow night."

She stood at the top of the steps waving to him.

Peter Cradd returned the salute, tipped the commissionaire, crossed the pavement, and stepped into his coupé.

"Hôtel Crillon," he ordered.

He drove down the hill, through the streets whose lighting, whose buildings, and whose passers-by were all so strange to him. He got his key from the concierge, who respectfully attended him to his room, and wandered about aimlessly for some time. Half dressed, after much hesitation, he entered Reggie's room. Yes, the lad had been right. It was evidently the one reserved for the lady. There were all sorts of dainty trifles about—the lace border to the fine linen sheets, bowls of flowers—even the bathroom of green marble was a little palace of luxury. He threw open the window, and stood looking across the tops of the quaintly roofed houses northwards. There were lights flaring everywhere. The roar of traffic was louder even than in London. His passion had burned itself out, and with it his anger. He was conscious only of an intense weariness, a sadness with which seemed to be blended, almost for the first time in his life, a tormenting self-pity. His first night in Paris! He remembered only a few hours ago he had wilfully barred his thoughts. He had not dared to think of it in detail, yet the great joy of it had been there, the joy of it thrilling through his pulses, turning every spring of life towards happiness. And deeper even than his self-pity was his self-contempt. He thought of his upbringing, of his dreary life, of his family, their day-by-day existence, his day-by-day struggles. How could he ever have dreamed that such a one as he had been could step into a world so far removed, could have walked hand in hand with "her leddyship" in any other save a world of dreams? He didn't blame her—only himself—

but it was a very tired Peter Cradd, very conscious indeed of his years and sorrows, who crept into his bed at the Crillon just as the morning sounds were beginning in the street below, and day was breaking over the tops of the houses.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXIV

For the next few days, Peter Cradd pursued the harmless routine of the intelligent sightseer in Paris. He visited the Louvre, he walked in the Gardens, he spent long days at Versailles and Fontainebleau, he bewildered himself at the Autumn Salon. He drove in the Bois, visited Notre Dame and the Bastille, and went back again to the Louvre, wondering often, as he paused before one or other of the famous pictures, which were her favourites. Sometimes he lunched, always he dined, with Reggie, but he deliberately refused to accompany him on any other of his nocturnal adventures. Even on their last night, he was obdurate.

"You forget, my dear young friend," he pointed out, as they lingered over their coffee, "that there is a generation difference in our ages. When I was your age, I have no doubt that these little ladies with their false but gracious weapons would have amused me, and the dancing, and the affection which costs so little to give."

"So little!" Reggie groaned. "You wouldn't have thought so if you'd heard Adèle last night."

"It's the sort of thing," Peter Cradd went on, "which either appeals or doesn't appeal. I've given it its chance. I've no morals that I know of. I just want to do what I feel like doing, and I don't feel like being smothered in powder and lip salve and all manner of cosmetics for the sake of a few

minutes of spurious excitement. I am not criticising your generation, Reggie," he went on, a little sadly. " I daresay I should have been just the same too with your opportunities, but this sort of thing never happened to come my way. I am only inclined to wonder at times whether it may not spoil a little something better that may come later on."

Reggie sighed.

" I'm not one of those chaps who's always thinking of what may come later on," he observed, making mystic signs to a *sommelier*, resulting in the reappearance of the brandy. " Life's cut up into so many days, like little water-tight compartments, and I believe in making the best of each day. The next one might bring something better, or it mightn't."

" You are probably right," Peter Cradd admitted. " I started my Bohemian career a little tired, you see. However, I think I'm beginning to discover myself now, and that's the great thing. You won't mind going home to-morrow ? "

" I wonder you've stuck it as long as you have, old chap," Reggie acknowledged. " I'm pretty well all in. Will you get the tickets, or shall I ? "

" The concierge will attend to it. I'm going in to see the last two acts of *Louise* at the Opera."

" You won't join me just for a glass of champagne and a biscuit somewhere afterwards ? " Reggie asked.

Peter Cradd shook his head.

" I'd rather not, if you don't mind," he replied. " It's no good forcing home a failure. I've tried. It isn't principle with me. I know what I want. I shall never get it, but I prefer to make believe."

He paid the bill, and they parted at the door. For the next two hours, Peter Cradd listened to

marvellous music. He walked home with the excitement of it still in his veins, but a bitter little smile upon his lips. He knew quite well why this sense and passion for beautiful things was growing upon him. It was at her unspoken bidding he had gone to the Opera that night. It was with a striving to see through her eyes that he had sought out the famous pictures and taken them to his heart. It was because, somehow or other, the attitude of mind into which these things threw him seemed to bring him nearer to her, that they were becoming more precious. Very sadly he acknowledged to himself that he was incurable. He was too old to deal with such a curious calamity as had overtaken him. He was ready enough to submit to any amount of self-castigation for ever having thought or believed it possible that she could have remained kindly towards him save out of natural graciousness, but, so far as he was concerned, the evil was done. Her place in his life, and all that she represented, would be for ever unfilled.

He lay awake that night thinking of these things. Now and then there was almost a lump in his throat, but something of the bravery, the rather pitiful, unrecognised bravery, which had kept him plodding through the martyrdom of those twenty-five years, was coming now to his aid, to help him deal with this last catastrophe. One must pay for one's follies, and whilst one was paying there were splendid compensations. It was still a very wonderful world, even without this greatest gift. . . . He fell asleep dreaming that with a tiller in his hand, a leaning keel, and Large at the sail, they were facing a south-west wind, trying to make Seagull's Island on one tack, even though there was no one by his side, and Seagull's Island was empty save for the shrieking birds.

WITH their mackintoshes buttoned up to their chins, George Barnslow and Peter Cradd ventured their way along the curving bank a few days later, with great pools of water on one side, fed by tiny but increasing streams, and on the other the broad channel rapidly filling. There was the sting of salt in their faces, the grey, vaporous masses of low-hanging clouds over their heads. The seagulls came screaming inland. Though it was only half-past three, the light from the Point was flashing. They reached the spot where on one side the swollen channel rose to within two feet of them, and on the other the spray from the narrower courses was beating into their faces.

" As far as we'd better venture, young fellow," Barnslow declared. " We're close to the place where the hut you saw lifted from its foundations and swept away used to be. We're safe enough here, for ten minutes, but I wouldn't take the odds even now against a ducking."

" Who cares ? " his companion muttered. " It's a fine sight, Barnslow. See the breakers—there beyond the line."

" Something a little pitiless about it. Perhaps it's a good thing for our vanity that we're continually being reminded that there are forces in nature we can't control."

" In nature as well as in ourselves."

Barnslow tried to light a pipe, failed, and put it resignedly away.

" No use trying to talk philosophy," he muttered, " I can scarcely hear my own voice in this wind, much less yours. Right about turn, young fellow. We've done our afternoon's tramp."

They retraced their steps, and before they

reached the quay, the channel on their right-hand side was full—an angry, tossing medley of waters. Lights were twinkling out on the hills, and from the houses of the village itself. There were only a few fishermen left on the quay, and they were engaged in securing their boats.

"Not our weather, Large," Peter Cradd remarked.

"It'll come again, sir," the fisherman declared cheerfully.

"Teach us a lesson, these chaps, you know," Barnslow observed, as he drew his friend along towards the Old Vicarage. "That's the way to face the bad times. Large is hard put to it through the winter months, especially when it keeps too rough for the fishing. At least he was before you came, I know."

Then Peter Cradd took his courage into his hands. He had the opportunity for which he had longed. They were sheltered now from the wind, their bodies still glowing with the effort of their wild walk. The sense of comradeship between them had never been greater.

"Barnslow," he began, "before I left for London you told me to look upon you as a friend."

"You are a friend," was the prompt response. "You've been a godsend to me down here. I hope for my sake you will never go away again. I wish for your own—well, I won't go on with that."

"You think I'm lonely?" Peter Cradd queried. "Well, for the matter of that, what about you?"

Barnslow removed the pipe, which he had now succeeded in lighting, from his mouth.

"I'm a different sort of chap," he pointed out. "I haven't had your wearing life. I am strong. You're wiry, but in places you're weakly and sensitive, Peter Cradd. You need things more than I do. You'd be better with a woman about

the place. You're full of sentimentality. I'm not. You'd be the stronger for having someone to lean on you. I know—the many times I come upon you unobserved and I see those quaint eyes of yours fixed apparently on nothing. They're not ; they're looking for something. Maybe I know what it is—maybe I don't. All the same, I wish you could get it."

" And I wish you could get what you deserve, Barnslow," Peter Cradd said valiantly.

He faltered, and then he suddenly decided there was nothing whatever to be gained by tactful preparation.

" You talk about my wanting a woman," he went on. " You want one more than I do. You've got a wife fit to live with ; I haven't. Why don't you go and find her ? "

Peter Cradd had been prepared for an explosion. None came. Barnslow, from sheer surprise, seemed to have become speechless. When he did open his lips, he spoke hesitatingly. All the volume of his voice seemed to have gone.

" Go and find my wife ? " he repeated. " What do you know about her, Peter Cradd ? "

" First of all what you told me—that you were married abroad and that she left you because she was an artist and thought she had a great voice."

" But have you seen her ? " Barnslow demanded. " Don't beat about the bush, man. Have you seen her ? Where is she ? "

" She is in London. Her dreams of becoming a great artist are shattered. Her voice has given way. She has few friends, and no one to look after her. She could go into musical comedy, but she hates the idea."

" How the deuce do you know so much about it ?

"I happened to meet her at a party given by my lawyer's son," Peter Cradd explained. "In her sitting-room, I saw your picture. She told me that you were her husband."

"It's a small world," Barnslow muttered. "Did you tell Louise?"

"I haven't seen your sister since."

They turned in at the Old Vicarage gate, shed their outer garments, and hurried into the library, where a fire with huge logs was burning in the grate. Mrs. Skidmore presently brought in their tea, and drew the curtains. Another storm had blown up, and the sleet was beating against the windows. Peter Cradd dragged the tea-table up to the fire. The tiny room, with its oak panelling, its engravings, its huge grate, the hissing of the logs, the smell of the toast, was amazingly attractive. On the table was a parcel of books, as yet unopened. There were many others strewn about. It was all immeasurably comfortable. Nevertheless, Peter Cradd knew that its great appeal to him was that it was a refuge, the hiding-place of a beaten man.

"So you saw Eula," Barnslow repeated presently. "How was she looking?"

"I considered her," Peter Cradd replied enthusiastically, "one of the most attractive-looking young women I had ever seen. I was very sorry for her. She seemed very lonely, and almost broken-hearted."

"Why didn't she write to me?" Barnslow growled.

"Too proud, perhaps. Here's her address. Go and see her."

He scribbled it upon a piece of paper, and passed it across the table. Barnslow flicked it away.

"Why should I go and see her?" he snorted. "She left me a year after we had been married,

She was always having letters from opera people then, and it turned her head. She used to talk about earning two or three hundred pounds a week."

"Her voice couldn't stand the climate," Peter Cradd explained. "I wouldn't let her drift into musical comedy if I were you, Barnslow. I'd go and fetch her."

"She wouldn't come."

"I feel sure she would," was the confident assertion. "She probably had a little wave of foolishness. Someone flattered her. Those offers sounded real. She's discovered now that her voice isn't what she thought it was. Try it, Barnslow. She'd be happy enough here. It was the suburbs of Manchester she couldn't stick."

Barnslow finished his tea, leaned back in his chair, and began to fill his pipe.

"Did you say that she was in straitened circumstances?" he asked, pausing for a moment before he struck a match.

"Very, I should say. And let me tell you this, Barnslow. It isn't well for a beautiful young woman, with a sensitive disposition, and a sense of failure rankling in her all the time, to be left alone in London. If ever you want your wife back again, go and fetch her, and go and fetch her now."

Barnslow said nothing. His host noticed, however, that he had stretched out a long arm, and had recovered the piece of paper upon which the address was written.

"She never asked me for any money," he said at last, gloomily. "I never read any theatrical news. I never doubted that she had one of these wonderful engagements which she said had been offered to her."

"She was probably too proud to ask you

when her voice had failed her," Peter Cradd suggested.

The Vicar stretched himself out a little farther in his easy-chair, one hand holding his pipe, the other in his trousers pocket.

" Life's a deuced funny thing," he declared. " Here, only a little time ago, I came raging along, meaning to chuck you out of the place for immorality if I could, and now you sit there, master of my old house, quietly pointing out to me my duty with regard to my wife."

" I shouldn't presume so far as that," Peter Cradd protested. " I simply happen to have come across her, to know that she is unhappy and lonely, and to discover that you were her husband."

" And she still had my photograph upon her mantelpiece ? "

" She had indeed."

" The devil ! That's queer."

There was a brief silence. Barnslow tucked away the scrap of paper in his waistcoat pocket.

" You heard that Louise was going to be married ? " he asked abruptly.

" I saw it in the paper."

" I hope she means it this time. She's been half engaged to him before. I shan't believe it until they go to church."

" It seems a very suitable match," Peter Cradd observed.

Barnslow sat up in his place.

" What makes a suitable match ? " he demanded. " I know my marriage with Eula was unsuitable. She was never meant for a parson's wife. She is full of what they call temperament—I'm not—yet if she could have stuck it for another year I think we could have fought our way through. I was growing to understand her, and she me a little, I

think, when those infernal opera people got hold of her. But look at Louise and Durcott. Durcott's a good shot, manages his estates well, is a careful magistrate, a credit to the County Council, but he's as thick-headed as I am—worse—never reads a book, never watches a sunset, doesn't care a hang that here, almost at his gates, is one of the most exquisite pieces of scenery in England, doesn't care about that sort of thing. In plain words, what's the good of a man like that to Louise? She's brimming over with ideas and temperament, yet she must marry someone, and Durcott never leaves her alone. This time he's a wise fellow. He's got it publicly announced. I suppose it will go through. All the same, I don't like it."

"Precisely why not?" Peter Cradd demanded.

Barnslow smoked furiously.

"Look here," he said, "I'm not a sentimentalist —you know that—on the other hand, I'm not such a rough sort as I seem. I have my own ideas about marriage. Of course, if the people are puppets to start with, it doesn't matter whom they marry. The first man who comes along with enough money to keep a house, he's good enough for the first woman he meets who wants a husband to provide for her, but the others in the world—well, it seems like this to me, Peter Cradd. As a young man you need women all the time, lots of them, friendly and pleasant to talk to—one might take 'em out for a day, might even do a little spooning. Same way with a girl. She may like a man well enough to play round with him, but I tell you if they're the two who ought to be married, there's a little fire springs up which won't burn for any other person in the world. The girl doesn't hesitate. If she does there's nothing in it for her. If she once looks at a man and begins to wonder whether she could bear

to be in his arms, and puts it off, says she'll let him know presently, plays with it all, and argues with herself, marriage between those two will be a rotten thing. Eula never hesitated when I asked her. She was in my arms sobbing, before the words were well out of my mouth. We came near making a success of it, although we didn't, but I tell you, Louise and Durcott will never make a success of it. Louise may lose some of her finer qualities, she may coarsen down a little so that they rub along all right and she takes her place in the County and entertains Durcott's friends, and brings herself to sleep with him and have babies and that sort of thing, and yet, Louise being what she is, and Arthur what he is, it will be a rotten marriage."

"And you say that you are no sentimentalist," Peter Cradd remarked quietly.

Mrs. Skidmore knocked at the door and entered. She carried a telegram in her hand.

"Miss Adams at the Post Office, sir, saw you come down here, so she's brought a telegram instead of sending it up."

"Thanks very much," Barnslow groaned. "A telegram for me! I know. It's that confounded old bore Hoppner wants me to take his service."

He tore it open, read it, and read it again.

"No reply, Mrs. Skidmore," he said. "Thank Miss Adams very much for bringing it down."

The housekeeper departed. Barnslow pushed the telegram across the table and Peter Cradd read it:

"Coming Blakeney Thursday. Please meet four forty train Holt. Louise."

THERE were days, even in December, when the weather was fine enough for sailing, and on the following morning, Peter Cradd, hastening hopefully to the quay, found Large in a complaisant frame of mind, and the *Sea Bird* already adrift. Perhaps for the first time since he had torn open that terrible square envelope Peter Cradd felt the stir of life in his veins again. There was no warmth in the sun, nor was there any singing of birds to listen to, or patches of marsh flowers to marvel at, but the east wind which stung his cheeks was salt with the tang of the sea and the movement of the boat as they rode over the grey waters was in itself exhilarating.

" Can we make Seagull's Island ? " he asked.

Large, who was busy baiting a trace, glanced almost carelessly at the sky-line.

" There's four hours of fine weather certain, sir," he answered. " You can get out to the bar, if you like, to fish. I've a pail of bait yonder."

" I'd rather run in to the Island," Peter Cradd decided. " You can try and catch a few dabs whilst I walk about there."

" Heard tell of some mackerel," Large remarked, as he threw a spinner overboard. " They won't be this far in though, I doubt." . . .

There was little change about the Island, except that the sand was heavier and moister, and the patches of green scantier. Peter made his way towards the hillock where he had helped her place her easel, and from its summit stood and looked out seaward. The freedom and the space of it all loosened his thoughts. Once more he began to see things clearly. He was a fool to have left Blakeney. He knew that now. With his forty-

six years of spent existence behind him, this craving for experience was folly. The sheltered life should have been enough for him, a negative state of bliss, the end of all worries and discordant notes, the hardships of his days of toil. Something had come into his blood, and driven him to temporary madness. Well, he had learned his lesson. He even began to look upon that projected enterprise, which was to have taken him to heaven, as a thing fundamentally impossible. How could he ever have imagined that a brilliant young woman of a different social world from his could sacrifice everything for the sake of an elderly, commonplace person, ignorant of all the amenities, the civilisations of life? A moment's sober consideration rendered the whole idea fantastic, and under the pearl-grey skies, with that restless waste of waters sweeping in on the edge of the marshland, with its deep semi-stagnant pools, its tiny streams, its beds of mosses still green and brown, even in mid-winter, all practical thought faded away. She didn't belong to the world of sane things; neither did he.

He thought of her picture. How could a critic's logical sense be brought to bear upon it, that turmoil of massed seas and clouds, the spreading storm, the maelstrom of the rolling elements preparing to strike the earth with fire and thunderbolts? Louise's whole inspiration was a defiance of practical things, a fine gesture against the easily comprehensible. Her life was like that. It was possible to realise this of her—but of him? He became very humble as he stood there—a small, lonely figure on the sea-riven plain. Her feeling for him could have been nothing but a tribute to his unusualness. In neither of the two worlds in which she moved had he any place. She had decided very rightly. She had realised in time what the

carrying out of their freakish scheme would involve. Never again would he run the risk of a mistake like that. He had inherited freedom too late to taste its fullest joys. Better by far for him to continue in that state of mild and questioning wonder which the unrolling of life had first produced in him. It was too late. His strength was too puny to wield the flaming sword. The lesser heights had their own calm and æsthetic beauty. . . . He was a different man as he took the tiller once more and guided the boat back through the early twilight. That dazed condition of suspended sensibility in which he had lived for days had passed. The joyous accomplishment of that miraculous adventure would after all have torn his mild little soul and body to shreds. Louise, in her very failure, had preserved him.

It was, after all, so wonderful a life. The lights twinkled out as he brought the boat tumbling through the waters to the quay side. A dozen willing hands were there to help. A dozen fishermen and loungers wished him good night, for he was well liked about the place. He plodded along the narrow stretch of road, walked up his path, and saw with pleasure the shaded lamp on the tea-table. Mrs. Skidmore was glad of his coming. There were some muffins—she had found the man passing through—and her daughter had sent her a pot of strawberry jam. The quiet elegance of the tea equipage—he had bought much of the china and glass from Barnslow—pleased him. He ate too many muffins, and he felt a twinge of indigestion afterwards. He was strong enough, however, to light his pipe, draw that fascinating brown-paper parcel to the side of his easy-chair, cut the strings, and lean back with a sense of luxurious repose. This was not a mood, he told himself, with a touch

of fierceness—no dogged effort to rebuild the shattered fragment of his life in saner shape. This was common sense, genuine, unchangeable relief—here was the life for which he was fitted, here the best place to enjoy the fruits of his great good fortune. He drew out the volumes—Carlyle, a complete set. The bombastic, arrogant magnificence of the *French Revolution* had already fascinated him, but it had been one of the books which Barnslow had recalled. Next came a missing volume of Walter Pater, little of which he understood, but which he read for the sheer æsthetic beauty of the prose. Underneath was De Foe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the one book which had survived from his tangled boyhood's memories; a rare edition of *Dorian Gray*—insisted upon by Louise. Raindrops pattered against the windows. Mrs. Skidmore drew the curtains, bustling cheerfully about the room.

"I'll have your dinner ready at eight o'clock, sir," she announced, as she finished her clearing away. "There's the dabs you caught this afternoon, and I'll cook you a little bacon with them sweetbreads Kerreson sent us. And would you like a sweet, sir, or maybe a little cheese?"

"A little cheese, if you please, Mrs. Skidmore," he decided, "and get up half a bottle of the claret so that it can be warmed in the room."

"Very good, sir."

She bustled out. Once more his fingers groped down towards the books. What a sybarite he was becoming—the pleasant, scholarly room, with its worn oak, its quaintly shaped chairs, its heavy curtains shutting out this unexpected storm, the whistling of the wind outside, the hissing of the logs burning brightly in front of him. Still another parcel of books to look at! A few minutes more

luxury in deciding where to place them, which to start with. After all, happiness for him lay in the quiet ways. He had floundered about a little like a poor imprisoned butterfly let out by some kindly hand from the captivity of a stoppered jar. He had found his way now, though, to the light of the sun.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXVII

PETER CRADD, seated, a few mornings later, at breakfast, was startled by the screech of a motor horn outside. He caught a faint glimpse of a flying figure on the tiled path, the front door was swung open and closed, and Louise presented a breathless appearance.

"Did you ever hear anything more disgraceful?" she exclaimed. "I came straight to you directly I knew. You must tell George what you think of him when he gets back. I am disgusted."

The unexpectedness of the whole thing rendered him speechless. He stood looking at her across the breakfast table. She threw aside her dripping mackintosh, opened the door, and flung it out into the hall. Always unusual, she was wearing a dress of dull heather-coloured tweed, with a tam-o'-shanter hat. She was overpowering in her anger, whether it was real or simulated, in the beauty of her strange effect, her nervous, scarlet mouth, her berimmed but brilliant eyes.

"Do you know what has happened to me?" she went on. "I invited myself down here. I needed two days' rest. Would you believe me, George, who calls himself my devoted brother, met me last night as I asked, and this morning has gone off to London!"

" Dear me ! " Peter Cradd murmured—he could really think of nothing else.

She lifted the silver cover which Mrs. Skidmore had placed over his bacon and eggs, pulled off her gloves, and drew up a chair, or rather had her hand upon the back of one before her involuntary host could move forward.

" Thank you," she said. " I'll sit on the side away from the fire. I'm hot with anger, and I think I could eat two eggs, and is there enough coffee ? "

" We'll have some fresh, anyhow," he decided, ringing the bell.

" I simply couldn't eat any breakfast at home," she continued. " I was too furious. I went round and got the car, and tore down here, and now I'm here I don't believe you're a bit sympathetic. I suppose you think it serves me right, that no one could bear to spend even one day in the same house with me. Mrs. Skidmore," she proceeded, turning her head as the door opened, " I'm ravenous. Can I have another egg, please, and I think Mr. Cradd would like some more coffee. I'm sorry to be so troublesome."

" No trouble at all, miss," the housekeeper declared, as soon as she had recovered from her surprise. " It's a pleasure to see you, miss, if I may say so, and if it's not taking a liberty I'd like to say we're all very glad we're going to have you in these parts for always. He's a lucky man, Sir Arthur is."

" Is he ? " Louise meditated. " I'm not so sure, Mrs. Skidmore. I'm a difficult person, you know."

" The best of us is difficult at times," Mrs. Skidmore sighed. " I'll be getting the coffee, miss. I'd better cook a little more bacon too."

GIRLS

She disappeared. Peter Cradd was just returning to normality. Louise leaned across, took his hand and squeezed it.

" Peter, dear, I don't deserve that you should allow me in the house," she acknowledged, " but it's no good—here we are, you and I—and I know you'd never feel hard things, and it's by far the best way for us to meet again for me to descend upon you like this. It seemed natural to come, and here I am. I'm as God or rather the devil made me, a selfish beast, boring, worrying egoist. You're not angry ? "

" Of course I am not," he answered gently. " What you did was right. I decided that days ago."

" So you came down here. How romantic ! "

" I didn't, I went to Paris."

" You beast ! " she exclaimed.

" I have a commercial mind," he explained. " The tickets, the cabin, the suite at the Crillon. I really couldn't bear it. I took—someone else."

Suddenly it seemed as though all the life were drained out of her. She laid down her knife and fork. The eyes that asked him that sudden, fierce question were full of terror.

" Peter Cradd——" she faltered.

" I beg your pardon," he interrupted, taking her hand in his. " I was a blundering, stupid ass. I took Reggie Spearmain, my lawyer's son, the young man who showed me round London."

The relief in her face amazed him. Suddenly he was horrified. He saw what he had never dreamed of seeing again—two tears dimming her eyes.

" Wipe them away, please," she begged, leaning towards him. " I haven't got a handkerchief. You'll have to lend me one before I go."

He bent over, and did as he was bidden, with

shaking fingers. Nothing that he had ever imagined of any future meeting with her was in the least like this.

" Thank you," she said, " but still, I'm not sure that you ought to have gone. It's what I should have done, though, if I'd been a man. Did you behave ? "

" I spent one night in Montmartre with Reggie," he recounted. " After that I dined with him, but spent the evenings by myself. Our tastes weren't exactly alike. I saw all the usual places, and I found some wonderful pictures."

She drew a sign of relief.

" I ought to have known," she murmured.

" And then I came back here," he concluded, " and I have been very happy. There was one day when I was able to sail, and I went to Seagull's Island, and I spent hours there, and I buried all the bitterness that there was ever in my heart, and I buried, perhaps, a little of something else as well, and I came back here, and I ate a wonderful tea—I had indigestion afterwards from the muffins—and I had a charming little dinner, and a lot of fresh books, and I am going to stay here the rest of my life."

" So that is your story," she said quietly.

" I thought a great deal that day," he confided. " I thought of your wonderful picture, and it seemed to me that I got rid of a great many little thoughts and repinings. I came back with more understanding—more poise, isn't that the word ?—and here I am, as you see, settled down and comfortable, not minding the fogs or the storms at all. When it's too bad to go out there's plenty to do indoors, and there isn't anyone in the world has so pleasant a room as I have here, and thanks to George——" he added.

" Oh, books," she interrupted. " I know. I'm rather annoyed about it. You look much too contented. I believe you're putting on flesh. Thank heavens here are the other eggs."

Mrs. Skidmore arranged practically a new breakfast upon the table. Louise thanked her with one of her swift, delightful smiles. She gave Peter more coffee, and he helped her to bacon and eggs.

" Both eggs, please, unless you want another," she begged. " You can have all the rest of that bacon, and if you're still hungry you must make up with toast and marmalade. You see, I haven't eaten anything for five days."

" Have you been ill ? " he exclaimed.

" Not ill, but surfeited. Lunches and dinners all cooked by French chefs, all too elaborate, all absolutely monotonous. Food *de luxe* to me always tastes the same, and how sick one gets of it ! Bacon and eggs ! A meal like this would have driven me crazy a few days ago."

He laughed.

" I remember once in London coming to the conclusion that men's clubs existed for the purpose of providing us with plain food. Even in my little experience I began to feel like you. Ciro's Grill understands this," he went on. " I had ham and eggs for dinner there one night, with some light beer. They didn't seem at all surprised."

" Arthur won't take me there," she complained. " Too many of the theatrical world, he thinks ! But then Arthur is such a prig ! What are you going to do this morning ? "

He looked out of the window.

" Pretty hopeless, isn't it ? "

" I'll take you motoring. Put on your oilskins. We'll lunch at Brancaster or Norwich or some-

where. Isn't it disgusting of George to have left me like this ? "

She took his coming for granted. Somehow or other they had slipped back to their old places with no signs whatever of the tragedy which lay between them. Afterwards, when he thought it over and wondered at it, he decided that she was the only woman in the world who could have done it. He himself had buried resentment on Seagull's Island, but if there had been any lingering trace of it in his heart, those tears would have ended it.

" Rotten time in London," she confided. " Lunch with prospective mother-in-law, dinner with prospective aunt-in-law. Dose repeated next day with cousins-in-law, and all the Cariswood crowd *ad lib.* I've had the same thing said to me five hundred times, and said the same thing back again about as often. The phraseology of the world's worn out, Peter. We want new forms of congratulations and new responses. I've excused myself from a dozen parties to come down here, and Arthur is furious. I said that George was ill. Now that lie will come back to roost, as George is gadding about London, and, by-the-by, Peter, what about George going to London ? "

They had finished their meal, and were seated in opposite easy-chairs before the fire. He paused to light her cigarette and his own.

" George didn't tell me that he was going," he said.

" Have you any idea what he went for ? " she demanded. " The whole thing's so mysterious. Never said a word to me, got up at six to catch the early train from Norwich, and just left me a little note to say that he had to go to London, hoped I'd make myself comfortable, and he'd wire me when he would get back. Why, I ought to go back myself this afternoon."

"George didn't tell me anything," Peter repeated, "but I believe I could guess why he's gone."

"Guess away then, quickly," she begged. "I'm curious."

"I think that he's either gone to make enquiries about, or to see his wife."

"What—Eula?" Louise exclaimed. "Nonsense!"

"Well, I don't know. I talked to him about her the other night, and he seemed interested."

"You? What do you know about her?"

"I met her by chance at a party," Peter Cradd explained. "You see, Reggie Spearmain took me about in London quite a good deal. I thought she was very charming. Then one evening, in her sitting-room, I saw a photograph of George, and she told me that he was her husband."

"Extraordinary!" Louise murmured. "What else did she tell you?"

"Nothing at all. The rest I heard from George. You know all about the trouble, I suppose, just as well as I do."

Louise nodded.

"I have always felt a little guilty about it," she confessed. "I think I could have helped, but I didn't. Anyway, someone told me that she had gone back to Italy."

He shook his head.

"Her voice failed her. Something happened to it. I don't understand. The English climate, she thought, perhaps. After that, they all wanted her to go into musical comedy."

"Poor child!" Louise murmured. "I wish I'd known she was in London. I'd have gone to see her."

"I liked her," Peter confessed, "and it struck

me that she was very lonely there, and in a very difficult position. I told George so, and there you are."

"Always the squire of young women in distress!" she said, half mockingly. "How do you do it, I wonder, Peter? Why don't you rescue me whilst you're about it?"

"You're not a weakling," he replied, "and you are—you are not in any sort of danger. In fact, I imagine that people are calling you one of the most fortunate young women in London."

"Shut up!" she ordered. "I shall be ready in ten minutes. I'm going to change a sparking plug. Bring a pocket full of cigarettes, and if you have any ice in the house, bring a thermos flask of cocktails. Shall I dine with you, or will you come up the hill to me? I'd rather dine with you. It's always cosier down here."

Mrs. Skidmore received her orders with immovable face. Nevertheless, as she put on her hat, mackintosh, and goloshes to go out shopping, she confessed herself puzzled. There was "her leddyship," engaged to the Squire, the great man of the neighbourhood, a young, handsome fellow, typically Norfolk, and therefore typically to be worshipped, and here she was coming to breakfast with Mr. Peter Cradd, who was a kindly body, but elderly, and of no particular account—not only coming to breakfast with him, but whisking him off in her car, and inviting herself back to dinner with him. It was a problem. Her face brightened, however, as she swung up towards the village. There was Mrs. Kerreson, the butcher's wife, who would have her views upon the subject. There was old Mrs. Large, whose husband kept the fish shop, where she might get a young chicken—she'd have something to say. And to buy cheese

she'd have to go up the street to Mrs. Pegg's. Mrs. Pegg was always one for knowing what was going on around. Mrs. Skidmore stepped out, therefore, bravely, notwithstanding the rain and the wind. She was convinced that she had a pleasant morning's shopping before her.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXVIII

PETER CRADD, although he was not a nervous person, had scant fancy for his companion's methods of driving. For one thing, the " sports " car seemed to mean a body which just cleared the ground, and at the pace they maintained, the vibration, which Louise herself never seemed to notice, was, to her passenger's mind, exceedingly unpleasant. She had a firm grip of the wheel and a quick eye for the road, but her ideas of progression were distinctly of the steeplechase order. He was relieved, therefore, when, after half an hour's breathless rush through the air, she slowed up. They were travelling along a road which was strange to him, a road fringing the park of some great estate. They passed lodge gates, with deep-cut emblazonments, a park in which were some magnificent trees, and finally arrived at a great open avenue, at the top of which was a very imposing house of the Tudor period. Louise brought the car to a standstill and Peter Cradd ventured for a moment to sit upright, take off his drenched hat, and remove his spectacles. Louise was looking gloomily up the avenue.

" A very beautiful house," he remarked.

She nodded.

" My future prison," she observed. " That is Blakeney Abbey."

He continued to gaze at it with genuine admiration.

" It is, I think, the finest house I have ever seen," he decided. " You should be very happy there."

" You quaint person ! " she exclaimed suddenly " Do you think really life is any the happier because one lives in a house like that ? Does it make any difference to how you feel when you wake up in the morning—to your thoughts, to your repulsions, to your dreams, and everything else that counts ? Oh, Peter Cradd, how quickly you forget ! And I tried so hard to teach you. We live here, and here "—she touched her forehead and her left side lightly. " I shall never be able to paint in that place," she wound up abruptly. " Give me a cigarette."

He lit one for her.

" Would you like to see over the house ? " she suggested. " Mrs. Colson, the housekeeper, would welcome us. I believe, as a matter of fact, that Ursula, Arthur's sister, is there."

" I should hate it more than anything else in life," he declared fervently.

" Well, that's that, then," she said, slipping in her clutch. " Quite the nicest thing you've said this morning, and I'm feeling rather like that myself. I am going to take you to Norwich now, dear passenger."

" Capital ! " he assented. " I want to buy a gun. George is going to teach me how to shoot duck."

She made a little grimace.

" Don't let George lead you into his brutal love of sport," she begged. " Besides, if you become a famous shot here, Arthur will want you to come and shoot, and you'll hate that, won't you ? "

" No, why should I ? " he asked innocently

" It sounds very pleasant, but of course I should never be good enough. I only mean to potter about the marshes with George."

" No, you'd like to come and shoot at the Abbey," she said. " It is all so nice and Victorian. The ladies are not allowed out, even at the drives, but we come down generally in a wagonette for luncheon. I think, if I remember rightly, the men are served first ; they are the Gods of the day. The women are allowed to chatter to them, and wait on them, and sometimes I have known them to be permitted to walk afterwards as far as the first drive, but that is only on very rare occasions. Then they are packed off back to the wagonette. They return to the house, and get into pretty, frippery clothes in time to welcome their heroes home for tea. Norfolk, Peter Cradd—that's what it is—Norfolk."

He made no reply. One of her wild fits came over Louise again. The hedges and trees raced by, cascades of water from the pools standing in the roads leaped into the air, angry villagers shouted after them as they tore through regardless of the warning notices. Then she pulled up once more, this time in a broader road, the delicate spire of Norwich Cathedral faintly visible in the distance.

" Cocktails ! " she ordered.

He scrambled up to a sitting posture, and produced them. The hand which held the little cup was shaking.

" Are you very uncomfortable, poor man ? " she asked.

" I am," he admitted. " I don't very much like your car—makes me feel as though I were stretched on an operating table in this seat—with my head coming out of a coal-hole—I don't like your tyres, and, with every respect for your skill, I don't like the way you drive."

"You dear person!" she murmured, patting his arm with the fingers of her left hand, and holding her glass to her lips with the other. "It's like a breath of Norfolk air to hear the truth. They all think I'm wonderful in London, but then I drive their cars, not this terrible old bus. You've been so nice about it that I promise you shall be comfortable for the rest of the journey. There's a drain more cocktail for each of us."

They finished the contents of the flask, and made a leisurely entrance into the city. She swung round skilfully into the courtyard of the Maid's Head, and they were beginning the ascent of the steps to the coffee room when suddenly she paused with a little grimace.

"Oh dear," she sighed, "I quite forgot I promised I'd telephone Arthur at his Club about one o'clock. Ask them to get me 3,000 St. James's, will you?"

He obeyed, and they were scarcely at their table before a messenger announced that the call was through. Louise was gone nearly ten minutes. When she reappeared there was a significant little flush of colour in her face and a sparkle in her eyes.

"Dear passenger," she confessed, "I have been very rude. I wouldn't apologise to him, but I do to you."

"I don't see that that does any good," he ventured.

"Perhaps not, but it relieves my feelings. Lovely cold things, aren't they? Cold beef and ham for me, please, mustard, pickles, and some of those rolls. Oh, Peter, I do love these unsophisticated things to eat. If only one could get cold beef in London. Now please listen," she went on. "This was Arthur—'I hope,' he said, 'that you are now ready to tell me why you have made this

inexplicable visit to Norfolk?' 'Why inexplicable?' I asked, in my most lady-like tone. 'Because I've just seen George,' was the reply. 'You're apparently down there alone.' 'Not exactly alone,' I said. 'I had breakfast with Mr. Peter Cradd this morning, and I am lunching with him now at the Maid's Head Hotel.' Then I thought we were going to be cut off. What do you think he had the effrontery to say? He said quite clearly, 'Who the hell is Mr. Peter Cradd?' I heard the telephone girl gasp. Could I have some beer? What a lovely lunch!"

"Was that the end of your conversation?" Peter enquired.

"Oh, not at all. I told him that you were a very delightful new neighbour who had bought the Old Vicarage, and a few more pleasant things about you. When I had finished he asked me how long Mr. Peter Cradd's attractions were likely to keep me from fulfilling my social duties. Well, of course, I couldn't help laughing at him then. That seemed to make him a little better tempered. I promised him I'd be home to-morrow. He wanted to fetch me, but I wouldn't let him."

"I think, unless George is coming back," Peter Cradd suggested, "you ought to return to town to-night."

"You would think so!" she complained. "You grudge me half of that chicken which I am quite sure Mrs. Skidmore has trotted up to the village to buy, and my share of the jam omelet she'll probably give us afterwards. No use, Mr. Peter Cradd. No gentleman can cancel an invitation which he has given to a lady. I am dining with you to-night."

"I am very glad you are," he said.

"So that was that," she concluded. "I was

angry at first, but poor Arthur doesn't mean it. He is just naturally stupid."

"Don't you think," Peter Cradd ventured, "that as you had no reasonable excuse for coming away, and George was in town, he was likely to be a little angry?"

"But, you idiot," she pointed out, "I didn't know that George was going to be in town. I wanted to see him very much. I had several most important matters to discuss with him. I wish I'd told Arthur," she went on, "that George was in town in search of Eula, and that perhaps she was going into musical comedy. That would have worried him a little. We are almost, we Durcotts, you know, Peter—almost the strictest of the County families."

"A great deal better than being too lax," Peter Cradd remarked. "I suppose I am what you call a snob. Having been a small tradesman for the whole of my life, or rather not even a tradesman on my own account, but a commercial traveller, I have an intense admiration and respect for my social superiors. To own a house like Sir Arthur Durcott's, and to feel that it has belonged to your father and your father's father, seems to me simply a wonderful thing."

"You're a nice old dear," she told him. "It's the sort of thing that's all very well in a picture, or on paper, but it doesn't really matter tuppence. The only possible advantage in possessing ancestors is if they have preserved their characters and you have inherited their gifts. That unfortunately, however, is seldom the case. Stupidness is unpardonable in these days, and stupidity coupled with a certain form of bucolicism——"

"I think I'd stop if I were you," he interrupted her. "I don't believe you mean what you say

quite, and it doesn't seem very kind under the circumstances. And you are so kind really," he went on. " I remember how careful you were in the earlier days not to say anything you thought might hurt me."

" You're a silly man sometimes," she declared. " You slip down a little from where I place you in my thoughts when you assume that you could be any different in niceness and everything that counts because you had been a tradesman or a commercial traveller, and your father perhaps kept a shop. Those things are only important if the people bear with them the marks of their calling. There is only one standard of behaviour and niceness of feeling. When you have it, it doesn't matter if you're a coal-heaver. I'm not quite sure," she added, after a moment's pause, " that I know what a coal-heaver is. It was not, perhaps, a good simile. Let us say a postman. Have you ever seen old Morrison at Blakeney. If ever anyone possessed the manner of the great world, he does. . . . Oh, what fun this is, Peter! Do you realise that we are spending the whole day together?"

" I do," he admitted joyfully, but a little doubtfully. " It is very pleasant."

"Oh, is it pleasant?" she mocked. " Be natural, Peter. Say it is one more day snatched from paradise when you thought paradise had faded away. That's the way you ought to be talking to me."

He continued his lunch with expressionless face.

" Then once more," he confessed, " I am a disappointment to you. My paradise is as fixed as yours."

She hummed a tune for a moment, out of the latest operetta, and continued her lunch. Once or twice she smiled, but her eyes sought his in vain.

" This development in your character, Peter, is

amazing," she declared. " Do you know, you are well in the running for becoming the stern, silent man of fiction. I wish you wouldn't, please. It doesn't suit you. You should be like Charles Lamb. That is really the sort of character I admire. I don't like too much positivism. Principles, positivism, and obstinacy are high up in my list of vices. I haven't one of them, Peter. I'm positive about nothing in the world except that I'm enjoying my luncheon. I'm never obstinate because it's my greatest joy to change my mind when I'm properly convinced, and as for principles, I never had any."

He called a waiter, and paid the bill.

" Now," he announced, " I am going to buy a gun."

" I shall come with you," she decided. " You should have invited me, but I pass it over. I know a great deal about guns. I came with Arthur to see his gunmaker here the other day. He shoots with Purdey's himself, of course, but he has the guns for his keepers from here. A nice little fat man. I'll take you to him."

"Haven't you some shopping of your own to do?" Peter Cradd enquired.

" If I had," she answered, " I should throw it over. I have the greatest fancy for going with you whilst you buy a gun."

Nevertheless, they lingered for a few minutes over their coffee. When they got downstairs she moved towards the car.

" Let's walk," he begged. " When I think of these cobbled streets, and remember I had indigestion from those muffins the other day——"

" We'll walk," she assented, " but I shall choose the gun. Of course you know," she added, " that you ought to have a pair."

"I'll have half a dozen if you like," he answered, his eyes suddenly fascinated by a patch of unexpected blue in the stormy and wind-swept sky. . . . "I only want to do the right thing."

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXIX

"You are silent, my friend," Louise said, smiling at him towards the end of their very excellently cooked and served little dinner. "You are not happy? I believe really you have grown used to the big restaurants and the crashing of the music."

Peter Cradd sat up in his chair. Every hour of the day, his mind had been occupied with the same thought—why had she done this thing? Was it sheer cruelty, or just the careless egotism of a philanderer in emotions?

"I am sorry," he said, "if my silence has amounted to discourtesy. I was just wondering—and you know it was you yourself who once told me that when a thought comes to your mind, never kill it; even if you are with other people, give it time."

"You are excused," she smiled. "Do you want the rest of this jam omelet?"

"No more, thank you."

"Then I do," she announced, taking it on to her plate. "And now, please, what thoughts are passing in your mind, Peter Cradd, that those ingenuous blue eyes of yours so obstinately refuse to meet mine, and look out of those curtained windows?"

"I was just wondering," he told her simply, "why you did it?"

"Why I did what?" she asked. "Took this last piece of jam omelet? Greed, my dear. I

shall probably have indigestion, like you after the hot muffins."

"Why you came down here like this," he persisted. "Just what was in your mind, Louise? You could have gone back when you found your brother had left."

"I could, but I didn't want to," she admitted.

"And why didn't you want to?" he demanded. "I can risk your thinking me conceited, because you know that I am not, so I shall ask you plainly, did you come down here to see me? Did you stay down all day to be with me, and if so, why?"

"Always intriguing!" she sighed. "No one else can put things so simply and plainly as you. No one else, I think, could go so quickly to the heart of things. I had a great curiosity, Peter Cradd. Perhaps it was rather a tender curiosity. For once, when I broke faith with you, I tried to live up to my principles. I did what seemed to me to be the inevitable thing, and afterwards I found myself wondering and wondering and wondering how it had seemed to you. You never sent me a line. I didn't want one. I liked you for it, but I wanted to know were you angry with me, would you turn and abuse me if I suddenly appeared, would you be hurt and dignified, or would you be sentimental and talk about your broken heart? I just wondered, Peter, so much that I had to come."

"I understand," he murmured. "You were like the ladies in the arena who wished to see how their gladiator died."

"Don't be an ass," she replied. "As a matter of fact I don't believe you cared a bit. You look perfectly well, you've been to Montmartre, and heaven knows what that means; you're living here selfishly all alone with your books and your good

fortune, and I believe you're blessing yourself that you're not landed in an escapade."

" You are very clever," he admitted. " That is the conclusion I came to the other morning on Seagull's Island."

For the first time her eyes flashed their anger at him.

" I detest you," she said quietly. " We will talk of something else."

He rose to his feet and rang the bell.

" We will have coffee," he proposed. " As to liqueurs, I have unfortunately no choice. Benedictine or brandy."

Louise became rather astonishing.

" I don't want either of your beastly liqueurs," she replied.

There swept into his consciousness, all in line then for battle, a sudden psychological conviction. For the first time in his life he held the upper hand. If only he could keep it !

" The coffee and benedictine and brandy, Mrs. Skidmore," he ordered, as she opened the door. " You care for cream with your coffee ? "

" No, thanks."

The door was closed again.

" I suppose you realise," she complained, " that you are being very cruel to me ? "

" I wish to be fair," he said. " We both know everything that has happened, so I needn't go into the past. You came down here, you admit, out of curiosity. I object to that."

" Tender curiosity," she pleaded.

He waived the point.

" You have deliberately made yourself, as you know so well how to do, a perfectly charming companion all day," he continued. " You insisted on going back to the Vicarage to change your frock,

and you are wearing the one I told you once—I liked."

"But is that not a compliment?"

"Not the sort of compliment I can appreciate just now. I think it was more than simple curiosity that brought you here, Louise. I think it was to satisfy your own complex vanity. You wanted to see whether I was suffering. You weren't convinced, so you decided to make sure of it. That is the reason of your sweetness, the reason you have tried to make yourself as wonderful as ever to me to-night. Does that seem to you kind? I accepted what you did. I uttered no word of complaint. I took what was coming to me. Now you have made a deliberate pilgrimage down here to gratify—what? You know. Have I deserved this?"

She sat looking at him across the table. She was breathing quickly. Her eyes were fixed upon his. There was no smile upon her lips, nothing but an intense earnestness.

"I came," she confided, "because I couldn't keep away, because I loathed myself for having sent the letter, because I wished to God I never had sent it. Peter, please, be kind to me."

"My dear," he said, "I am sorry."

He held her hand gently in his. Then Mrs. Skidmore made her usual noisy and diplomatic entrance. She arranged the coffee on the sideboard, the liqueur decanters and glasses.

"Is there anything else, sir?" she asked.

He glanced at the table. He was playing for a few more minutes' respite.

"You can clear away, Mrs. Skidmore," he directed. "We'll have our coffee by the fire, Miss Barnslow."

She shot a quick, surprised look at him, and then

smiled. After all, she thought, it was like him never to forget. He carried a small table over, made the coffee, poured out the benedictine which she had selected, and arranged her cushions. Outside the storm seemed to be coming up again.

"I shall send you home," Peter decided. "It is no night for you to be driving that little car. In fact, I warned Richards to be ready. Tell Richards when he comes in," he added, turning to the housekeeper, "to have the closed car round at—at what time shall I say—at half-past ten? At half-past ten, Mrs. Skidmore."

The end had to come at last. The table was cleared. Mrs. Skidmore had made her respectful exit. He came and stood by Louise's side, held her hand for a moment tenderly, and then dropped it.

"You see," he pleaded, "I am after all a very human person, and I am still carrying rather a barbed shaft. The thought that you had come down here just to gratify—shall I say one of the minor sensations—to see how I was bearing it, hurt me. We will wipe that out, and that is the end of it. We will let it go, if you please."

She made no answer. She was looking away into the fire. He mixed his coffee with ridiculous care, poured out a liqueur and returned to his own place. Still she sat there quite motionless. He watched her furtively. She seemed suddenly tired, dispirited, older, a sort of depression, or was it sullenness, he wondered, had settled down upon her. . . .

He stirred his coffee, and drank it slowly. The cigarette which she had been holding fell from her fingers upon the carpet. He sprang up, retrieved it, and threw it into the fire. The fingers remained dangling listlessly over the chair. She took no notice of his approach. Suddenly she raised her head.

" I should like to go home now," she said.

He moved a step towards the bell and paused.

" Do you mean that ? " he asked. " It seems a pity. I don't understand how I have offended. I can't see any reason why you should hurry away like this."

" There is a reason," she insisted.

" I must drive you myself then," he told her. " I let the chauffeur go to a football club supper, but ordered him back at ten o'clock."

" I shall drive myself," she announced.

" That I cannot let you do," he objected quietly. " I can drive the cabriolet quite well. I have often done so, but if you please I should like you to stay just a little longer."

" Come here," she invited.

He threw away his cigarette and crossed the hearth-rug.

" Stand by my side, please. No, you can sit on the arm of that chair. Hold this poor neglected hand."

He did as he was told.

" I came down here," she continued, " because I wanted to see you, because I wanted to be with you. There wasn't any reason about it. Why do people do these things ? You can imagine, can't you, if you hurt anyone whom you cared for, and the days came and the days went, and you saw nothing of them, it wouldn't be curiosity which would make you slip away to find them, it would be something else ? Peter Cradd—Peter—I am very much afraid that it was something else."

Her fingers tightened in his with an hysterical grip. He kept himself shiveringly away from her.

" It was just now at the table I realised it," she went on. " I set my will against yours, and you conquered. Peter, you have grown stronger every

day, and I have grown weaker. Be kind to me. Have pity on me."

"Louise! . . . You say this to me!"

He lifted her hand to his lips, a hand which, though it hung near the fire, was so cold, and he kissed it. He kissed it tenderly and fondly, and afterwards he still held it.

"Louise," he assured her, "if ever you hurt me for one moment you have made divine amends. Yours was the right choice. We know that. You couldn't have gone away with me. It wasn't possible. An elderly husband of no account would be bad enough; an elderly lover for you would be—I can't help it—ridiculous. Don't think that I haven't every sympathy," he went on, his voice becoming a little firmer. "I saw you there in London in the midst of all your friends. I know who they are. I read their names in the papers. You belong to them. You belong to their life, you belong to the man you promised to marry. How could you at the last moment give up everything, destroy friendships, be cursed by your relatives, even by your brother, and come wandering off, just on the wings of a whimsical fancy, with me? It would have been awful, dear. I should simply have waited for the day when I saw the light fade from your face, and the fear come into your eyes. It couldn't be done."

"It seems queer that it should be you who say that," she murmured.

"I do."

"How can you judge?" she asked, looking up at him, and he saw now that her eyes were again wet. "How can you judge how much the thing she wants most in life counts to a woman? How can you judge whether it does not count more than every friend she has ever had—than all her tom-

fool relations, even to dear old George? You can't judge, Peter. I tell you that I have changed my mind."

He was speechless for a moment. He was almost afraid of his heart—it beat so quickly—something that seemed like live fire in his veins—but he fought bravely.

"It is too late," he said. "This can't be done, Louise. I've seen the truth. I see it now, as you would see it in a few years' time."

She suddenly seized him by the shoulders, and drew him towards her. He struggled to free himself, but his strength was waning.

"You will have to come," she insisted. "You will have to give in, Peter. This time my mind is made up. You think that I don't mean it?"

"You can't mean it."

"Very well," she decided, "I will prove it. You can countermand the car. I shall stay here. After that you will perhaps realise—what is it?" she asked, with a gallant little smile—"your duty as a gentleman. You will whisk me off somewhere to-morrow morning. I am going to stay with you, Peter."

Again her arms were open. Suddenly Peter stood rigid. There was the crunching of footsteps upon the gravel, a voice in the hall. He moved away.

"Don't go," she begged fiercely. "What does it matter who it is?"

But Peter went. He was at the sideboard pouring out another liqueur when the door opened a little hastily, and Durcott entered.

To an intimate it would have been readily apparent that Arthur Durcott was in a furious temper. He was also, however, essentially British and particularly Norfolk.

" Come to fetch you back, Louise," he announced stolidly.

" Arthur ! " she gasped. " What on earth are you doing here ? Why have you come down ? "

" For the matter of that," he rejoined, " why have you ? George is in town. Saw him this morning."

" Won't you take your coat off ? " Peter Cradd invited tonelessly.

Durcott answered without looking at him.

" Thanks, no. I'm not stopping."

" Have you ever met Mr. Cradd ? " Louise asked. " Sir Arthur Durcott. I'm not sure that I'm ready to go yet, Arthur. Sit down and talk for a little time."

" Nothing to talk about here," he replied. " A few things to say to you when I get home."

" You can say them here just as well," Louise told him. " Mr. Cradd is an intimate friend of mine and of George."

" I gathered the former at any rate," Durcott said, looking round the room. " Nevertheless, I don't know Mr. Cradd, and I'm not prepared to say what I have to say before a stranger. I'll go so far as this though, Louise. I don't understand the reason for this ridiculous journey of yours down here, and I'm not asking you anything about it for the present, but I have come here purposely to take you up to town to-morrow morning. It is absolutely necessary that you attend the luncheon at Worcester House. We shall have to start at eight o'clock."

"Supposing I do not wish to attend the luncheon?" she asked coldly.

"You will hurt the feelings of a great many people," he pointed out, with unexpected tact, "and you will put me in the devil of a hole."

There was a short silence. Peter Cradd, as though out of courtesy to his unbidden guest, had remained standing—a slim, almost shadowy figure in the background of the room. She leaned a little forward. So far as she could see, his face contained no expression at all. He was certainly not embarrassed. As for fear, there was no possible trace of it. He simply seemed to have succeeded in becoming absolutely negative. She realised easily his attitude. The situation was hers, of her creation, it was hers to deal with. In those few seconds, when the ticking of the clock in the corner was the only sound in the room, she knew that she had to make her decision. The thoughts raced through her mind. Supposing she told the whole truth. She knew Arthur Durcott well enough to realise that he was exercising tremendous self-control, and she rather admired him for it. There was not an atom of bluster in his manner; there was even some measure of dignity. Supposing she said: "I am not going to marry you, although half London has sent us their congratulations. I am going away instead with Mr. Peter Cradd, who is forty-six years old, has a wife and several grown-up children, and has spent the greater part of his life as a commercial traveller earning a salary of four hundred pounds a year?" Supposing she told him that? She knew the Durcott temper, and she could guess the scene which would follow. Something terrible—almost tragic! Durcott would try to get her out of the room. She would refuse to go. She was certain

that he would kill Cradd rather than let her carry out her announced intention. He would honestly believe that he was doing it for her sake, and in the background she knew very well that Peter Cradd was waiting, unafraid, for her word.

" Well," she sighed, " if it must be I suppose it must. I should prefer to have stayed here until George returned. I came down to consult him upon several matters, and I was amazed when he suddenly left for London."

" You will be still more amazed when he comes back," Durcott assured her grimly. " That can keep, however. Where shall I find your coat?"

She said nothing for a moment. Peter Cradd moved a step forward.

" If Miss Barnslow is ready to go," he said, " I will find her cloak."

She glanced at the clock.

" Well, I think perhaps I'd better—under the circumstances," she added.

Peter Cradd, unhurried, left the room. He returned almost immediately with her fur coat. Durcott took a step forward.

" I'll see to that," he said roughly.

Peter Cradd passed him by, unnoticing, and somehow or other Durcott made no attempt to intercept him. Louise stood up, and slid into the coat which he held for her. Durcott watched them both, fuming but puzzled. It was outside the sphere of possibility that a girl like Louise could be in any way attracted by this small, elderly man, yet there was something which he utterly failed to understand in her rush down into Norfolk, in the atmosphere of the little room where he had discovered her. Louise, as he knew her, was dominant mistress of every situation in which she found herself. He recognised in her now a different mood.

He had no clue to the enigma, but there it was, the certain, unavoidable fact—Louise in the presence of this strange little man was subdued, more womanly than he had ever known her. He knew, too, and fiercely resented the fact that she came with him against her will.

" Mr. Peter Cradd," she said softly, as she held out her hand, " we have had a wonderful evening, and we shall have others, I hope. Thank you so much, and for my lunch."

He walked with them to the door. Outside, the lights of Durcott's car were blazing through the darkness.

" I am afraid," he said, " that you will have an uncomfortable drive."

She suddenly laughed.

" Not so uncomfortable a one as you had this morning," she whispered, holding his arm for a moment, in intimate fashion.

He stood there, framed in the doorway of the sombrely lit hall, watching the two tall figures descend the avenue. Louise, he could see, had drawn a little apart from her companion. Her left hand was occupied in holding her coat closer around her. Durcott, a fine figure of a man, walked a little apart, his hands thrust into his mackintosh pockets. At the gate she turned and waved to him. He could scarcely have seen the gesture but for the motor lamps—a pale, white hand it seemed in the rainy gloom. Then the engine began to hum. They stepped in and disappeared.

So there had been no tragedy, or had there been one? Peter Cradd wondered. He sat in his easy-chair, and watched the logs crumbling into grey ashes. The woman who, a few months ago, had

been a creature of mystery to him, had lately become so understandable. He had learned to follow her whims, to trace the workings of her mind. From the moment of Durcott's entrance, he had read every thought that had passed through her brain. He knew perfectly well why she had accepted the situation, knew perfectly well that it was to avoid the passionate scene, probably the tragedy which would have followed, that she had held her peace. Durcott would most likely have killed or mortally injured him. According to his lights, he would have been justified. He had never known a second's fear in anticipation, nor did he know it now in retrospect. He would have fought, of course, as well as he could, but the encounter would have been ridiculous. A beaten man is always a humiliated one. She had spared him that. It gave him peculiar pleasure to believe that so much was for his sake.

He listened to the wind and the rain as the night wore on, fetched fresh logs, and sat there, never absorbed in consecutive thoughts, his brain a trifle numbed, in fact, yet encouraging and nursing the little flashes of speculation and memory which came to him sometimes. His mood was strangely changed since her visit—his mood and whole outlook. It was a primitive battle which had been joined between them, and he gloried in his victory. He had no false shame about that. He hugged his success just as he had felt crushed and humiliated by the end of their previous relations. She had meant it. She had felt the things her lips and eyes had told him. He was not wholly a freak creature, appealing to her only for a fantastic and momentary enterprise. She had met him on the same level, and she had been willing to give everything she had to give.

A day or two ago he had accepted the inevitable, but he had accepted it drearily and miserably. To-night he felt that he could accept it almost joyously. The psychology of the simple people of the world such as Peter Cradd is at least an honest psychology. Perhaps it was a small thing, yet Peter Cradd, for all his occasional greatness of soul, was full of human weaknesses. Something for which vanity is too poor and mundane a word, had been soothed by her coming, by her voluntary surrender. He had a store of memories now which indeed he might carry with him through the rest of his life, like beautiful plants worthy of cultivation and tending, memories which might run like a thread of fine gold through all the dreams he might dream, and all the great love stories of the world which he might read. Peter Cradd went to sleep that night in front of his fire, a sad yet almost a happy man.

CHAPTER XXXI

Two afternoons later, more unexpected visitors found their way to the Old Vicarage. To Peter Cradd's astonishment, George Barnslow and Eula walked in upon him. Barnslow was radiant but a little subdued.

"Now see what you've done, my interfering friend," he said, grasping Peter Cradd's hand. "What do you think of this, you reconciler of obstinate men and flighty wives?"

"But I am not a flighty wife," Eula protested, holding out her hand also, shyly, but very sweetly. "I am not really a flighty person. I will not say that I spent all my days in tears because this big brute of a husband had deserted me. He deserved

that I should have gone back to Italy, but I did not go. I waited."

"And kept my photograph upon your mantelpiece luckily," Barnslow added.

There was a moment's silence. Then Eula began to laugh softly.

"Ah, but life is like that," she said. "Everything goes by chance. And George knows now, as he ought to have known before, that I have always been very fond of him, but no one who had been brought up in the sun, who had lived in the sun, and who had the sunshine in their heart, could live in Manchester. Dear husband, that was too much."

"And here?" Peter Cradd asked. "Look at that."

The promise of the morning was being fulfilled. The clouds had passed, a stream of sunshine, brilliant in effect, even if lacking in warmth, had crept through the window, lay across the carpet, and vied with the firelight in the hearth. Eula clapped her hands.

"But it is beautiful!" she cried. "If you had brought me home here, George, I should never have been unhappy."

"I thought you'd have been bored to death," Barnslow confessed. "I thought you liked to be near people and theatres."

She shivered.

"But such people! George dear, the desire of one's life, if one is ever so little of an artist, is beauty, and you have beauty here. For one hour I walked this morning, looking down on these—you call them marshes? I wonder if you know how beautiful they are—you who live here—even now, and when the spring comes—why, springtime will be lovely. I shall stay here and watch it day by day."

"I am quite sure," Peter Cradd declared heartily, "that you will be very happy. I am fast making up my mind that it is the only place in the world for me."

"More books, I see," his visitor remarked, looking round.

"More and more and more," was the happy reply. "Come and see my gardens whilst the sun shines. I have a new hobby now—bulbs!"

"Bulbs?" Eula repeated. "But you will be lonely all alone here, Mr. Cradd, with just bulbs and books, and sailing. George tells me that you are fond of sailing."

"And fishing," he put in. "No, I shall not be lonely."

She passed through the postern gate into the walled garden with a little cry of delight.

"How neat and tidy everything looks," she observed, "and are those not snowdrops?"

"Yes," he answered, "and before so very long there will be primroses, and after that there will be crocuses, and finally hyacinths, and that bad-tempered husband of yours there will be so furious because whatever else may happen to my bulbs my hyacinths will be finer than his."

"You funny men," she laughed, "would you really ever quarrel about hyacinths?"

"Not about hyacinths," Barnslow intervened suddenly, "but," he went on, taking Peter Cradd's arm, "you and I are going to have a talk, my friend."

"Whenever you please," was the resigned reply.

"Shall I run away?" Eula suggested. "I see there is another garden, and I want to pick some of these snowdrops. Yours are planted upon too windy a path, George. They are flat with the ground, and poorer than these."

" Pick some then," her husband enjoined smiling, " and come back to the study."

The two men made their way there. Barnslow flung himself into an easy-chair, and Peter Cradd was suddenly reminded of his first visit.

" Look here, Peter Cradd," the Vicar began, " I came to see you once, white with fury to think I'd let my Vicarage to a libertine. You know how I changed my mind about you. You know, and this is the truth, how I like you. I believe you're a good fellow, Cradd. You're sincere. I can't see you doing a wrong action, telling a lie or anything of that sort. I can't drive religion into you, but never mind. I'm forced to confess that you're none the worse man for it. That's what I think of you, Peter Cradd."

" It's very pleasant hearing."

" The rest of what I have to say, perhaps won't be," Barnslow continued. " This business with my sister has got to stop."

" It has stopped," Peter Cradd announced. " It is finished."

" I'm more than glad to hear it. It's done mischief enough."

" If it has done any lasting mischief, I'm sorry," Peter Cradd said humbly.

" I don't pretend to understand the thing," Barnslow went on thoughtfully. " You know what I think of you, you know how I like you—I've just told you so—but that you should have been the man to have brought about this extraordinary situation with Louise amazes me. There—I tell you so frankly. This has got to be a friendly discussion, Peter, so I shall fill my pipe."

Peter Cradd pushed his tobacco jar across the table. He lit his own pipe, and his fingers were quite steady.

"Can't understand it," his friend repeated. "Never shall. Louise has refused more offers of marriage than anyone knows of—some from men who count for a good deal in the world—refused them all. She accepts Durcott almost reluctantly, after refusing him three or four times, and then I find—I hear it from her own lips—that she has been on the point of running away with you. Can you explain it to me, Peter Cradd?"

"I cannot explain it to you, or to myself, or to anyone," was the quiet acknowledgment.

"You are forty-six or forty-seven years old," George Barnslow continued. "You have a wife, and as you yourself said, a terrible family. How the dickens, Peter Cradd, did you dare to think of taking my sister away to Florence, or wherever it was, and ruining her before the whole world? I'll leave the moral part of it, because you'll remember all the time that I'm a parson, but even if Louise had gone crazy, how dared you think of such a thing?"

"I don't know," Peter Cradd acknowledged once more. "I have no excuse. I simply haven't cared for anyone all my life, and I suppose like everyone else I had feelings, and as the years went by the feelings I hadn't used must have gone to some secret chamber somewhere inside me and got locked up, and then came the time something happened, the whole store of all the years was fired into life, the door flew open, and I found that I cared—and it was your sister. I don't call that surprising," he added, "but I agree with you, the surprising thing to me was that Louise cared—or thought she cared."

"Oh, she cares right enough," Barnslow grunted. "You've made your part of it clear enough, but never to the end of my days shall I fathom this infatuation of Louise's."

"All I can say," Peter Cradd propounded, "is that I think it began by her being sorry for me. And, because I was so fond of her, I grew to understand her moods and her thoughts. There are some women, you know, I read in one of your books, George, who love weaker men. The strong good woman so often does love either a weaker or a bad man. I'm not bad, George. I sometimes wonder whether I am really as weak as I seem, but I must seem so to her, because every gift I don't possess, everything which would make her world scoff at the idea of her caring for me, simply rouses more pity in her heart—kindly, sweet pity, and that may grow to mean things in time—other things. That is how I explain it to myself when I wonder."

"And I should think you're pretty well near the mark," Barnslow agreed. "Now look here, Peter, you've heard of what's happened?"

Peter Cradd shook his head.

"Not since I saw them," he replied. "Sir Arthur Durcott came down here and fetched Louise away on Tuesday night. She had been dining with me. We had been sitting over the fire, talking. He came in. I think that he was very angry, but he behaved very well. He took Louise away."

"And Louise tells me to my face," Barnslow growled fiercely, "that if he hadn't come——"

"Hush, please!" Peter Cradd begged. "Please don't. Who knows? He did come, and Louise went away."

"Well, now I'll tell you the rest of it," Barnslow went on. "Louise obeyed. She went up to London. She made herself perfectly charming at the luncheon, and at the end of it she took Arthur and his mother and his aunt—that old Duchess—and me, into the library, and she told us that she was very sorry but that she could not marry

Arthur. She declined to give any reason, said that she was going to marry no one else, but irrevocably she had decided that she could not marry Arthur. Everyone behaved very well, but Arthur insisted upon a word or two alone with her and with me. The rest went away. I must say I never liked Arthur so much as in that moment. He quite agreed that the truth was not for the world, but he insisted upon having it for himself. She told us then about you. I think Durcott had guessed it. I—well, frankly—I knew that you had become extraordinary friends, but anything beyond I should never have dreamed of."

"Naturally," Peter Cradd murmured.

"This is what Arthur Durcott said to her, and he said it very clearly. He agreed to take his dismissal like a man, to make light of it to the world, to accept the friendship which she offered him—on one condition—and that was that she gave her word of honour to him and to me, her brother, that she would never undertake that enterprise with you which had been in her mind. He didn't threaten her, but he just told her quietly that wherever you and she went he would find you out and he would kill you, and I believe he would have kept his word."

"Quite reasonable," Peter Cradd admitted. "You would probably have had something to say yourself."

"If he had failed, I probably should. Now the situation's getting clear, isn't it, Peter Cradd? Louise gave her promise."

There was a long silence.

"I trust Louise, but at the same time I require your promise too."

"You have it," Peter Cradd replied.

"Your promise?"

"My promise. Your sister has given her word. I add mine."

"Then that's the end of that," Barnslow declared, with a little grunt of satisfaction, "and we're all good friends. Louise has gone down to Torquay to stay with her godmother. Arthur Durcott's come back to his shooting, and to-morrow you will read in *The Times* that the marriage arranged between Sir Arthur Durcott, Baronet, of Blakeney Abbey, Norfolk, and Louise, only daughter of the late Dean of Norwich, will not take place. I am sorry for Durcott, because I like him, but any man who married Louise would have a handful. Now it's five minutes past eleven, Peter Cradd. I know it's early, but a great weight is off my mind, and there's Eula on the path. What about it?"

"The boy is just coming up the drive with the ice," Peter Cradd responded, springing up. "I'll mix them myself."

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXXII

PETER CRADD'S life drifted now for many weeks along channels as peaceful as his own beloved fingers of the sea stealing up into the marshes on a spring morning. Every day he saw something of Eula—who had settled down happily into her new life—and Barnslow. When the weather permitted, they sailed. His new boat was still building, but he had had a powerful motor fitted to the old one, and there were few days upon which they could not venture out as far as the estuary. Later in the afternoon they trudged off together sometimes for the flighting, but here Peter Cradd was scarcely such a success. He found himself dreaming at his post behind a bank, dreaming as he watched the

grey mists close up, the darkness fall, and the mystery of the marshes increase. In the distance was the thunder of the sea. Every now and then the gulls went shrieking over his head. What wonder that when at last the moment came, even though Barnslow, if he had time, blew the whistle which rested between his teeth, he heard only the rush of wings as the expected flight passed over his head and vanished in the gloom behind, his gun often still undischarged. Barnslow, however, was always good for a brace, and they seldom went home empty-handed. The triumph of Peter Cradd's season was one night when his thoughts happened to be a little detached and he heard a great honk honk over his head, saw something which looked to him like a flying dragon, and for once swung far enough ahead. There was a crash in the wet marsh behind—a grey goose, the first that had fallen to their guns. He walked home a proud man.

"If you would give up mooning so much," George Barnslow said to him, as they swung along the lane, "you'd soon get the hang of it. As it is, you suddenly find the duck upon you, and you just poke. You haven't time enough to settle down and swing right through them."

"I shot a goose," Peter Cradd said proudly.

"I have never seen George shoot a goose," Eula put in.

"I'll have a swan before the season's out," her husband promised them.

He strode on to speak to the keeper. Eula and Peter Cradd fell a little behind. It was odd, considering they all spent so much time together, that they were very seldom alone.

"Everything going all right, eh?" Peter Cradd asked kindly.

"Wonderfully," she assured him. "I am quite

contented down here, and I have found all my old feeling for George. I make no excuse for what went before, because it was Manchester, but you—sometimes I look at you, my dear friend, and I grow hot and cold. Do you know that you paid my dressmaker's bill? And think what you did for me afterwards? Ought I to save up the money and pay you back?"

"Past history," Peter Cradd consoled her. "Besides, you were a part of my education. You taught me how to order dinners, and all sorts of things."

She sighed, and took his arm in friendly fashion.

"Peter," she confided, "often I think of those days, and I tremble. I was so lonely. I was not really bad—not at all—but I did so need someone to help me a little, to look after me, to be always kind. I was so lonely. I hated all the young men—I would have nothing to do with them—but you came, and you seemed so restful, so gentle."

"My dear, of course I understand," he declared cheerfully. "Cut those days out of your thoughts now. They are finished and done with. You have George, and if you can stick this out in the winter you'll simply adore it in the summer. A life of picnics and sunshine and blue sea, fishing, and all sorts of things. Dancing at the hotel in the evenings, if you want it. As a rule everyone's too tired."

"I shall love it all," she murmured with a little sigh of pleasure.

"And I've spoken to George about it," he went on. "I'm lending you my rooms in town for a fortnight next month. It will be a little change for you."

"And what about you?"

"I shall be perfectly happy down here. You

know, for over twenty years of my life I had a great deal too much of having someone nagging me from the other end of the table, and three discordant young people always clamouring for something I couldn't give them. I learned to appreciate the luxury of solitude. I shan't be a bit lonely really."

"It will be great fun," she admitted.

They went, and for three weeks Peter Cradd was alone. He spent every minute of the day when it was possible out of doors, striving for that physical fatigue which deadened thought. He was content —always he told himself he was content—but there were times when the little demons hopped out at him, his blood sang to insurgent music. He changed his reading, went back to Carlyle, plodded faithfully through Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, eschewed Swinburne, and even denied himself the sentimentalism of Tennyson. The exercise he took, and the healthy life he led, notwithstanding occasional sleepless nights, seemed to make him grow younger every day. No one would have recalled for a moment the stooping, shabby, listless-looking man with his bag of samples, trotting wearily from warehouse to warehouse in the old days. He had put on flesh, his chest had developed. Only his face remained lean, and his features more powerfully defined. George and Eula, when they came back, both of them delighted with their trip, marvelled at the change in him.

"Shows you were never meant to be a city man," Barnslow remarked, as they lingered over a glass of after-dinner port up at the Vicarage.

"I feel tremendously fit," Peter Cradd acknowledged. "Listen, George, I must ask you—how is Louise?"

"Well in her way, I believe," Barnslow answered dubiously. "She's working hard. Going to have

her picture ready for the Academy, and Lady Cariswood told me she scarcely ever accepts an invitation to go anywhere."

"Is she well in health?" Peter Cradd persisted.

"I thought she looked rather pulled down. She came out with us once or twice. Eula and she got on better, I'm glad to say. She asked after you, wanted to know how you spent your time. She'll be down as soon as the picture's finished."

"I'll go away if you wish," Peter Cradd suggested.

"Don't be an ass," was the prompt reply. "Surely there's something to be got out of friendship? Your joint promise is like a writing in heaven. So long as you've given that there's nothing more to worry about. If you went away, I believe that Louise would be hurt. Friendship is a great thing, Peter Cradd."

"Let us go and ask Eula to sing to us." . . .

Torment again that night. After all, there could be no harm in seeing her. It was March now. The spring was at hand. She would be down in a month or two. All this time he had never quitted the place. He needed clothes, things for the house. The long road to London, straight in places as a racing track, gleamed so often before his eyes, calling him to rush along over heath and moor until he found before him the reflected blaze of the great city in the skies, and drove on to enter into its mysteries. And, as it happened, the next morning's post determined him. There was a letter from Mr. Spearmain's office enclosing a square, stiff envelope, in which was a square, stiff card. He drew it out, and read:

"*Mrs. Cradd requests the pleasure of your company at the marriage of her daughter, Lena, to Mr. Roderick*

Grant, on Tuesday, March 4th, at Holy Trinity Church, Sloane Square, at 2.30 p.m., and afterwards at the Hyde Park Hotel from 3.30 to 7 p.m.—dancing.—R.S.V.P."

Peter Cradd stared at it, scarcely comprehending. It seemed so far outside his life. His daughter—Lena—an ill-tempered, selfish, lazy, unprincipled young person, his cooler judgment had always pronounced her—to be married! He read Mr. Spearmain's letter. It was, as a matter of fact, from Reggie:

"MY DEAR MR. CRADD,—

"*Doubtless in accordance with your express wishes that all communications should be addressed to you through us, the enclosed card has reached us for forwarding. I don't suppose it is of much interest to you, but dad thinks I ought to write and remind you that you once promised to attend either the wedding or the funeral of any member of your family. I believe that in one of your bad moments you added that you preferred it to be the latter. Anyway, there the thing is. I knew you'd wish it, so I had a few enquiries made. I don't think the fellow is up to much from a social point of view—comes of a roughish stock, I think—but he seems to have a tidy business which is a little short of capital, and sticks to it all right.*

"*I should think a change from your Norfolk rain and mists would do you good. Come along up, and we'll have a little dinner together the night before the ceremony.*

"*Ever yours,*

"REGGIE."

Mr. Cradd went about whistling. He and Mrs. Skidmore packed his bags. There was no need for

him to take much, as he had left his town clothes in Arlington Street. Then he motored up to the Vicarage, and announced his departure.

"Jolly good idea," Barnslow approved. "What's the use of keeping a place in town if you don't have a look round sometimes? If you were really a sensible fellow, Peter," he said patting him on the shoulder, "you'd leave all your dreams here, drown them, or bury them if you like, and go and see Louise, like a good pal."

The moment the words had left his lips, he was almost frightened at the change in his friend's face.

"Do you think I might?" the latter murmured, almost under his breath. "Do you think she'd be glad to have me?"

"I'm sure she would. I sometimes think it's the one thing you ought to do. I never saw a fellow improve so much in health as you have down here, but you've got a queer look about your eyes sometimes I don't quite like."

"I'll go, anyway," Peter Cradd decided. . . .

The next day he started. It was all very much as he had expected. There was sunshine now and then during the day, and the first dust of the season upon the roads. Passing some woods, he fancied that he caught the perfume of early violets. Certainly there were primroses in many of the hedges. He drove himself to Newmarket, where he lunched. Afterwards he leaned back in the corner of his cabriolet car and closed his eyes. The early twilight was falling about London as they drew near Barnet. Farther on the lamps were sending out a pale glow, and in North Audley Street there was a slight fog. In Arlington Street he had tea, and, sitting down at his desk, wrote some letters—one a formal acceptance of the wedding invitation, another a brief note to his daughter, enclosing a

cheque for a thousand guineas, and a third, over which he lingered long, to Louise :

" *I had to come to London,*" he wrote, " *I have a daughter being married the day after to-morrow. May I come and see you? George thinks I ought to. If so, what time?* "

He sent this note down by hand. To pass the hours until the reply could come, he had his bath, and dressed early. In due course the messenger boy reappeared. He held out a note. She had been in, then. It was her handwriting. He tore open the envelope :

" *I still walk in Kensington Gardens. I should like to see you in the same place and at the same time as last. It was, I believe, a quarter to eleven. To-morrow morning.*"

He drew an immense sigh of relief. Then he went to the telephone and rang up Reggie. The reply was a trifle languid, but when Peter announced himself, there was a distinct change.

" Really you, Cradd, old man? I've been hoping for this . . . Will I dine with you? Rather! . . . I don't mind where. Suit yourself. You come up so seldom. I shouldn't bother about the Club . . . Ciro's at eight-thirty. I'm your man! Meet you in the bar."

Peter Cradd actually hummed to himself as he completed his toillet.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXXIII

Louise showed no signs of ill health or even depression when she came walking swiftly down the

broad path, both hands a little extended, a brilliant smile upon her lips.

"Dear man!" she cried, as they met face to face. "Dear, dear man! How long I've wondered when one of us would have the courage to do this."

"I have told George," he said. "He rather recommended it."

"I know," she sighed. "George's idea of a promise is that it is a thing that couldn't be broken up with nitro-glycerine even. He trusts us like he believes in God. I suppose it's all right. Peter, don't move for a minute. Let me look at you. Stronger, yes—better, yes—but still there's something in your eyes, Peter. Do you want me still? Are you a little sad sometimes?"

"I am very often sad," he answered.

"Come along," she begged. "We walk to the gates. Of course your car is there, and I shall say drive me somewhere in a taxi, and you must tell me that you have just been made a member of Ranelagh, and we will drive down there, and a man in red livery will give us a cocktail, and that old bore Hartupp will tell us how rotten the golf is at Florence. It's all a game, my dear Peter, isn't it? But oh, how I'm loving it!"

She was walking by his side with all her old buoyant grace, but Peter for the moment was a little sad. He had looked more closely into her face, and she was thinner. Those faint hollows under her eyes, sometimes so quaintly attractive, were deeper now.

"Don't think that I daren't ask you to my studio," she said. "You shall come and have tea there with me to-morrow or the next day, if you like. We'll keep our word in the letter as well as in the spirit for George's sake, and for the sake of my promise to Arthur. I know what his fetish

is—what people say. Well, they shan't say anything about us, my dear. These two and fate have had their way with us. We're badly trapped. Do you think I was wrong to give that promise ? "

" I don't see what else you could have done," he admitted.

" Arthur, for all his restraint, was fearfully melodramatic, of course," she continued. " He probably would have killed you or me, sometime or other. Very likely his common sense would have made him break his word, but Peter, I was desperate. I just had to get out of marrying him, and he was willing, so long as I'd give my promise."

" I've given mine to George," he reminded her.

" We're tied, hand and foot," she declared, as they stepped into the car and glided off. " It's a queer position to be in, isn't it, Peter, but I can hold your hand. There's nothing said about that. I wonder whether you remember sometimes," she went on, looking dreamily into space, " that never, never once have you kissed me ? "

" I know," he agreed, " but you are not a person to be kissed, except by the man to whom you belong. That night in my study when your fingers gripped my shoulders, I thought that everything had arrived. If Durcott had been thirty seconds later, I should have kissed you then, Louise."

" What a pity ! " she murmured. " And yet, what devastation, what an awful scene there ! The ugliness of it would have destroyed everything. And then there would have been George afterwards, and all the rest of the people ! I suppose everyone would think we are well out of it. I don't know. I like the touch of your fingers, Peter. It's a long time since anyone held my hand."

" Are you quite sure ? " he asked jealously.

" I am quite sure," she answered, " and so are

you. You understand me. You showed it when you said that you hesitated to kiss me until I belonged. You're quite right. But I think I shall ask you to kiss me some day, Peter, because underneath it all, you see, there is something which no promise can bind, nothing in the world can alter. Howfoolish people are to make one promise the lesser things when nothing can change the greater ones. . . . Tell me about yourself. You don't flirt with Eula, I hope ? "

" Not likely ! " he assured her. " George and she are absolutely a devoted couple."

" You were kind to her when she was in London alone, I have been told," she said, turning her head a little.

" Not too kind."

She gave a little sigh of relief.

" Or to anyone else," he added, almost under his breath.

Her fingers tightened upon his.

" You are a very wonderful man," she murmured.

They drank their cocktails in the Winter Garden, they walked round the grounds, and lunched at the same table as before.

" What slaves to sentiment we are," she whispered. " I am feeling quite happy just because the waiter who served us last time is smiling at us now. . . . So you have come to town to see your daughter married ? I thought you had cut yourself adrift altogether from your family."

" So I have," he assented. " I always promised, however, that when one of them was married or died I would go to the wedding or the funeral, whichever it happened to be."

" Is there anything nice at all about this girl of yours ? " she asked.

" Nothing that I have ever been able to discover,"

he assured her. "She was greedy, luxury loving, selfish, and a liar. I am only thankful that she has come to a respectable end."

"I should love to see you at the wedding," she laughed.

"Well, you won't, nor anyone else whom I know, except Mr. Spearmain, who may be there. I hate going, and yet when I got the card I was wonderfully glad. You see, I've been fighting to keep away from London. Now I have had to come. So long as it wasn't purposely to see you I felt that it was all right. As I told you, George encouraged me."

"Perhaps if we saw one another every day for a fortnight or so," she reflected wistfully, "we might discover all those hidden faults we both of us must have."

"But alas," he sighed, "we can do nothing of the sort! You yourself reminded me that your promise to Sir Arthur must be kept in the spirit as well as in the letter."

"Oh, we'll take care of his *amour propre*," she said lightly. "We'll dine at a funny little restaurant in Chelsea where no one goes from the upper world, or I'll scramble you some eggs in the studio. You shall smoke your pipe afterwards, and curse my work."

"I'd like to see the picture," he confessed.

"You shall see it to-morrow," she promised. "Sometimes I think that it is the best thing I have ever done by far; sometimes I am doubtful about it. Tell me, have you been to Seagull's Island since?"

"Many times."

"You know that I am coming to Blakeney?" she asked.

"George told me."

"By the end of my visit," she predicted, "I shall know what is the best thing to do. Just at this moment I have no doubt. I am very happy, Peter—happier than I have been for a long time. The bonds of my promise cut as deeply as ever into my flesh, and yet I'm happy to be here with you."

"I am glad I came," he told her simply.

They drove back to town almost in silence. As they drew near the quaint Chelsea Street in which her studio was situated he noticed that her hand was beginning to tremble.

"I shan't ask you to come in, Peter," she warned him. "I must get used to this sort of thing gradually. Good luck to your wedding! You can come and have tea with me afterwards, and tell me about it if you like. I'll invite another girl who paints with me sometimes."

He made a little grimace.

"Then I won't ask her. I thought it might make it easier, that's all."

He handed her out of the car, and she disappeared behind the bright green door. Peter Cradd drove back to his rooms.

"I'm a little tired, Barton," he told his servant. "I shall lie down in my room. I don't wish to be disturbed for an hour."

"Very good, sir," the man replied respectfully.

He mounted the stairs to his bedroom, locked the door behind him, and pulled down the blind. That hour was his own.

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXXIV

In the church, no sort of provision seemed to have been made for him, an omission for which he was duly thankful. He sat in the dark corner of an

empty pew, watching with a sort of hypnotised interest the whole phantasmagoria of a mock fashionable wedding. Mrs. Cradd—he felt a little shiver through all his body as he looked at her—was wearing a very fashionable dress from a fashionable dressmaker, which on a woman half her size might have looked well, but which had the air of endeavouring to escape from her body at every possible place. She leaned on the arm of Mr. Bloxom, who was furiously attired in a very open morning coat, a beflowered waistcoat, a white silk tie, and a huge bunch of white sweet-peas in his buttonhole. He wore check trousers, with rather more white than black in the checks, patent boots, and white spats. Peter Cradd watched him as he passed up the aisle with fascinated gaze. Lena, who for once in her life was a little frightened, and looked the better for it, was given away by George, who was quite correctly dressed, and bore himself reasonably, but whose complexion was more than ever pasty and pimply, and whose eyes were bloodshot. As soon as the ceremony was over, Peter Cradd crept out of the church, got into his car, and drove back to Arlington Street, went to the sideboard and mixed himself a stiff whisky and soda. He was one of the earliest arrivals at the reception.

"Why, here's dad!" Mrs. Cradd exclaimed, pointing him out to Lena. "You look well, Peter, though you seem dressed more for a funeral than a wedding."

Peter Cradd, whose attire was correct in every detail, except that his tie was perhaps a darkish shade of silvery grey, apologised.

"I live down in the country," he explained. "I don't often come to functions. How are you, George, and you, Henry? Lena, I am very glad if this is making you happy."

"This is Roderick, father," Lena announced, introducing the young man, who appeared to be a reasonable specimen of his class. "We're awfully obliged to you for the cheque."

"Jolly nice present," the bridegroom added. "Glad to know you, sir. Hope you'll come and see us some time. We are going to live in Welken Square, in Kensington, not so far out."

"Thank you very much," Peter Cradd replied. "You're on the Stock Exchange, I hear."

"In a firm of jobbers. A good business, but of course not what it used to be. Try a glass of fizz, sir. It's pretty good stuff, I believe."

"Ought to be," Mr. Bloxom interposed, in a deep voice. "Hi! This way, waiter!" he called out to a man carrying a tray. "I chose it myself. Mrs. Cradd knew she could rely upon me. Gave over a hundred bob for it wholesale. Same brand and year as they serve down at Ascot. Try it, sir."

Peter Cradd sipped his wine, and approved verbally. Personally he considered it disgusting. Lena, secretly proud of her father, in whom she saw a distinction which most of the others lacked, took him over to show him the presents.

"Dad," she said, "I sometimes think we were awful beasts to you in the old days. Every one of us deceived you, and cheated you. We took every penny of your money that we could get, and we gave you nothing for it at all. How you must have hated us!"

"I wasn't fond of you," he confessed, "but, if I may say so, Lena, it gives me a certain pleasure to hear you acknowledge that. It shows me that you have begun to think."

"Oh, it won't last!" she confided callously. "It just came into my head at that moment. If we went back a few years, I expect I should be just

the same all over again. So would the others. It was simply damnable being so poor."

"Damnable also for me," he ventured gravely.

"Oh, we didn't stop to think of that," she admitted. "We shouldn't if we had to go through it all again, and there's no use pretending we should. We're selfish to the core, every one of us, and in our different ways we're just as bad now as we were then. It's all arguing and wrangling about money every day. That's why I'm jolly glad to be getting out of it all. Are you very happy, dad? You look so well, and quite different to any of us, but I'm not sure that you look quite contented. You won't mind giving me one kiss, please. It's the custom, you know, to kiss the bride, and people will expect it of you. I thought of you before I came. There's scarcely a scrap on my lips!"

He kissed her, and patted her hand. Soon afterwards he left. His little talk with her had been the one redeeming feature of a hideous afternoon. He drove down to Chelsea, rang the bell of the green front door, found it swing open by some unseen means, mounted the stairs, and stepped into a large room, one end of which seemed to be all window. There were two easels in the room, and from behind one of them Louise came forward to greet him. She was wearing a smock, and carrying a palette.

"God bless you, Peter," she said, "I'm so bored with what I'm doing, and I don't want to touch my big picture to-day. Anna, come and be introduced to Mr. Cradd, and then make the tea, dear. It's your turn. This is Mr. Cradd—Miss Van Rolstein."

A very serious-looking young lady, with pleasant features, but a somewhat abstracted manner, shook hands with Peter Cradd, removed her smock, stirred up the fire, put on a copper kettle, and produced tea-things.

" Don't you like my studio ? " Louise asked.

He looked around. The floor was of polished oak, but bare except for a couple of rugs. There were two enormous divans against the wall on each side, one or two comfortable easy-chairs, and little else. The divans were of black and yellow satin, the walls were painted in panels of similar colouring. The great clusters of roses which he had sent were effectively displayed in orange-coloured bowls.

" You can tell me what you think of the place as soon as you get more used to it," she went on, after she had installed him in an easy-chair. " Now I want to hear about the wedding."

" Just as terrible as I thought it would be," he confessed simply. " I shouldn't know how to dress people myself, or what sort of presents to give, or what sort of entertainment to offer, but it seemed to me that everything was wrong. The people looked like fashion plates gone crazy. The presents —no doubt they were expensive—looked as though they had come from a factory in Birmingham, and the champagne—I had one glass of it—was beastly. The only half-pleasing feature of the whole thing was the bride."

" Tell me about her," Louise insisted.

He obeyed, and she listened sympathetically. Presently they all three drank tea together.

" You know, Mr. Cradd," Anna Van Rolstein said, looking across the table at him, " that Louise has painted a great picture. She has spoken of it to me, and told me all about the country. You were there sometimes with her, were you not ? "

" Yes, I have seen it in the making," Peter acknowledged. " I live down there. I am beginning to know that sea and sky very well. By and by I am hoping that I will be permitted a glimpse at it."

'Presently," Louise promised.

"So you work here, too?" he remarked to Anna Van Rolstein.

"Only half the day. I stayed later this afternoon. I shall be going now in a few minutes. I still have to attend some classes that take a great deal of my time. Louise has passed all that, of course."

A little more perfunctory conversation, and tea was finished, and Anna had gone. He felt a queer little thrill as the door closed behind her, and Louise came and sat by his side.

"Dear man, how homely you make this place feel!" she sighed. "Now tell me some more about Blakeney. Does Eula really settle down there, and how many days a week have you been able to sail, and is the new boat nearly ready?"

He told her all the news in simple, pleasant fashion. By degrees the sense of strangeness passed away. The hand which she had slipped into his ceased to burn. She sprang suddenly to her feet.

"Now sit precisely where you are, with your eyes closed," she enjoined. "I shall arrange the picture so that the light is right. When I say you may look, you may, but not before."

He obeyed. In about five minutes she called to him. He stood up and looked across the room.

"My God!" he exclaimed, under his breath.

She came over to his side. He scarcely felt her presence. His eyes were riveted upon that mass of tumbling waters, the brooding sky, with the single silver slit across it, and in the background, just behind where the waves broke across the Point, a sullener mass of turgid, angry sea, fiercely threatening, touched into a lurid light by the last gleams of the lingering sun. It was almost breathlessly real, and it gave one the strange

impression of some dynamic force let loose by nature without background or foreground.

"Your work!" he murmured. "Yours, Louise! It is wonderful!"

She held him tightly by the arm.

"Peter, dear, you make me so proud."

"I have never seen anything quite so marvellous," he told her. "Why—you know how ignorant I am—but I don't think anyone has ever tried to show the sea like that."

"It is the best thing I ever did," she confessed, "and I did it whilst you were there, Peter, lying close to me, or stealing off to swim. Those were days of inspiration."

She moved a little away, and came back again.

"There is only one thing," she confided—"one thing I know is wrong, which troubles me a little, and yet I can't quite see it as it should be—I can't remember. It's the colour of the sea—the long streak of sea, Peter, just before where the breakers come."

He nodded, and looked at it fixedly. Then he turned to her with a smile.

"I know."

"You know what?"

"Look at the sky—that ought to tell you," he pointed out. "That strip of sea all the way along had a gleam almost of red in the purple of it."

She looked at the sky, she looked at the sea, she caught at her breath for a moment. Then she threw her arms round his neck, and laid her cheek against his.

"You adorable man!" she cried. "And to think, to think that I spent hours and hours, and couldn't see it for myself. Peter, you are amazing! I can do it, too, I can do it in a day, and I know the shade! There's something of that deeper, fluid

cochineal, something of that deeper purple. I can get it. Peter, when I have it, when it is all finished as I can finish it now, there will be something else alive in the world, near my heart, as you are, fashioned with my own hands, but wonderful. It is wonderful!"

She gripped his arm more tightly than ever. He felt her shivering.

"I don't want you to go," she said.

"And I must very soon," he told her gravely.

"We dine to-night," she whispered.

Something in the sobbing sweetness of her voice filled him with a great horror. His eyes travelled back to the picture.

"Don't look at that," she cried, "or I shall begin to hate it. Look at me. Don't you want to look at me, Peter? Aren't I yours—really yours? My dear, how cruel they are to us!" she went on. "How cruel! Why did we make that promise, you and I? Peter, it was a wrong thing to do. How can we weave bonds like that with words? I was crazy."

"But you promised," he reminded her. "I, too, have promised."

She moved suddenly away, walked furiously up and down the room for a moment. When she came back, she was breathing quickly. Her mouth had relaxed. She seemed to be laughing inside. Her eyes had grown larger and softer.

"Peter," she whispered, "what did you promise?"

"I promised never to take you away."

"And that was just what I promised," she cried. "Peter, they haven't the right to take all our happiness from us. We are still here. They shan't kill our lives altogether. This isn't Italy. You shall steal up to see me here, and we'll be happy.

Some day something may happen. Arthur may marry. George may weaken—he's human, after all—and everything may come. I have given up that stupid world. I haven't paid a call, been to a party, or accepted an invitation. I live here, and here only. I'm adrift from the others. Peter, what do you think?"

He held her by the shoulders. He wasn't in the least ashamed that his voice was choked.

"Louise," he groaned, "you and I can't deceive even ourselves. They didn't stop to frame words for our promise, but we know what was in their hearts, what was in ours."

"You won't?" she cried.

"It isn't I, dear, who won't—it's you."

Her arm stole up to his neck again. She leaned her head with its mass of beautiful, tumbled hair, upon his shoulder.

"Peter," she whispered, "come to my little restaurant near here to-night. We'll dine there. That's breaking no promise. We'll dine there, and we'll talk. We can have a corner table, and no one will see us. We can be all alone, and we can talk like two sensible people. There must be some way out. You and I must find it, Peter."

Her arms held him tighter, and in her eyes it was there again, the new terrible thing. Yet he broke passionately away.

"Tell them both then," he cried. "Tell Durcott, tell George we've failed him. God grant I may never set eyes upon him again, but we'll tell him."

"You're mad!" she cried.

"I'm sane for the first time in my life," he answered.

"We'll tell them afterwards."

"No, before. I am ready—now."

She flung herself upon the couch, sobbing. He

sat on a chair with his arms folded. Opposite to him was the picture. Every now and then the sound of her sobs reached him. Suddenly she sprang up, and pushed him towards the door.

"You're right, and I'm wrong," she gasped, "but go away—before I kill you!"

SIMPLE PETER CRADD CHAPTER XXXV

It was a very tired and miserable wedding guest who descended disconsolately from his car and let himself in to his rooms. Barton met him in the passage. There was something a little mysterious about his air.

"There's a gentleman, at least a person, waiting to see you in the library, sir," he announced. "I didn't know whether to admit him or not, but he'd have waited outside in the street if I hadn't, so I thought it would be better to have him in, private."

"Why?" Peter Cradd enquired, without the slightest interest.

Barton became confidential.

"I know the type, sir; with my late master we used to have them regular. Of course with you, sir, I know it's some sort of mistake or something, but he's a writter, that's what he is—this chap."

"A writter?"

"Wants to serve a writ on you, sir," Barton explained paternally. "Some account you've forgotten, I suppose."

"Didn't think I owed anyone a shilling," his master remarked. "However, we'll see about it."

He opened the door and walked in. A young

man who answered very much to Barton's description was standing upon the hearth-rug. He was respectably dressed. There was something a little furtive, though ingratiating, about his manner.

"Are you Mr. Cradd, sir?" he enquired.

"I am."

"Mr. Peter Cradd?" the young man repeated, dodging in behind his prospective victim, who had approached a little farther into the room, so as to cut him off from the door.

"That's my name. Who the devil are you, and what do you want?"

"I'll ask you to accept this, sir," the young man announced, pushing a document into Peter Cradd's hand. "Sorry, sir, but all in the course of business."

Peter Cradd stared at him in a confused manner.

"But what on earth is it?" he asked. "I don't owe anybody anything."

"It's not for debt, sir," the man replied. "It's a writ in the suit of Cradd versus Cradd—divorce courts, you know."

"Divorce?" the other gasped.

"Sorry, sir," the young man regretted. "I suppose these things happen in life sometimes. Sorry to bring bad news. It isn't so bad, after all, though," he went on—"desertion and cruelty. Good day, sir."

The young man was gone. Peter Cradd stood for a moment with the room whirling round. He read through the mass of verbiage, trying to extract sense from the couple of typewritten sheets. Then he stretched out his hand, and raised the telephone receiver. . . .

"Mr. Spearmain. . . . Yes, Mr. Matthew Spearmain at once. . . . Cradd speaking," he went on. "That you, Spearmain? . . . I say, Spearmain,

I've been served with a paper. The man called it a writ. I want to know——"

"I've just heard, Mr. Cradd——" the lawyer interrupted. "Your wife has entered suit for divorce against you for desertion and cruelty; if I'd had any idea that anything of the sort was pending, of course, I would have communicated with you. As it is——"

"Oh, shut up! Can she do it? That's what I want to know."

"I am afraid she can. You see, your treatment of the whole family was rather summary. The only thing is that she can't get any more money than you're allowing already, so you've nothing to lose in that way. I'm exceedingly sorry, however."

"Oh, sorry be damned!" Peter Cradd cried blasphemously. "See you to-morrow, Spearmain. God bless you!"

He rang off, and stretched out his hand for the telephone book. Now again the room began to go round with him. He tore over the pages feverishly. One came out in his hand. It was "C." He dropped it on the floor. The names he was looking at, the letters, swelled and retreated before his eyes. "B" at last—"B"—"BR"—or "A" was that? Again the letters came up as big as posters, and once more receded. He gasped, looked a little nearer, and a moment of clarity came to him. He saw. There it was—"Barnslow—Miss Louise Barnslow, 1706 Chelsea."

"1706 Chelsea," he said to himself with eyes closed.

Barton put his head inopportunely into the room. His master waved him away.

"Fetch the car, Barton," he ordered. "Tell Richards not to go away."

"He's still there, sir," the man replied.

"Tell him to wait. I am going back to Chelsea."

The door closed. His hand was once more upon the telephone. Suddenly, for the third time in his life, some wild feverish sense overcame him. He began to laugh. He laughed as he had laughed looking around the table before the days of his fortune, at his disreputable family, he laughed as he had laughed that day he had received the terrible letter from Louise, and he laughed this time bitterly, joyously, almost hysterically—the tears in his eyes, great sobs in his throat, his head swaying from side to side until at last it collapsed upon his folded arms. For several moments, he remained motionless. Then he lifted the receiver from the telephone, and raised it to his ear. Everything was becoming clear now.

"Number, please," the telephone girl asked.

Peter Cradd would have liked to have given her a hundred pounds. He was sure there was something sympathetic in her tone.

"1706 Chelsea," he demanded beatifically.

THE END